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Trump and Truth

Greg Weiner

WHEN GEORGE WASHINGTON convened his first cabinet meeting, the seats around the table were occupied by the likes of Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, the scholar-statesman from Virginia, an accomplished architect, horticulturalist, and future president of the American Philosophical Society, whose writing credits included the Declaration of Independence and *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

Next to him was the Treasury secretary, Alexander Hamilton, author of the bulk of the Federalist Papers, the foremost American contribution to the Western political canon. Henry Knox, learned in Latin, Greek, and French, self-taught in military history, and a general in the Revolution, served as secretary of war. It says something about the heft of the group assembled that perhaps its least distinguished member was Edmund Randolph, the attorney general, a graduate of the College of William and Mary who both introduced the Virginia Plan that became the template for the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 and served on the Committee of Detail that converted it into a first draft of the Constitution.

Shortly after Donald Trump arrived in Washington for his inauguration, he declared to a luncheon at his Trump International Hotel that “[w]e have by far the highest IQ of any cabinet ever assembled!” Setting aside whether intelligence is the proper measure of political competence—might he have aspired to assemble the wisest or most prudent cabinet in history?—it is no insult to such public servants as his secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, or Treasury chief Steve Mnuchin to say that Trump’s statement was almost certainly false. More intelligent than a line-up that included Jefferson and Hamilton? Smarter than Lincoln’s

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“team of rivals,” in Doris Kearns Goodwin’s formulation — William Seward, Salmon Chase, Edwin Stanton, and Edward Bates?

Trump’s claim, reflecting his propensity for the superlative form, elicited some groans and a touch of ridicule, but mostly knowing dismissals. Of course, there are no official records, as there ought not to be, on the intelligence quotients of cabinet members, so his statement was not objectively falsifiable. But others — the murder rate was the highest in decades, he saw Muslims in New Jersey celebrating 9/11 — have been.

Trump claimed at an inaugural ball that “even” the press had called the crowd that assembled for his swearing-in “massive” when in fact the coverage the entire day had emphasized the smallness of the turnout compared with the crowds for his predecessor. The next day he announced to CIA employees that he had seen a million to a million-and-a-half people at the inauguration, which, by multiples, outstripped all crowd estimates. The press, he now complained, had only shown empty fields. Standing before the CIA memorial wall as a backdrop, opposite which are etched the words “ye shall know the truth,” he said the assembled masses had extended to the Washington Monument. They had not. There are pictures.

This manner of falsehood is trivial compared to questions of war and peace. But all of Trump’s distortions raise a serious question: Does the integrity of language matter in politics?

THE FANTASIZING OF POLITICS

Trump is often said to have ushered in an era of post-truth politics. This is to give him more credit than he has earned. He is the culmination, not the origination, of this trend, for which the hard left, and especially the academic left, now awash in apoplexies over the president’s distortions, can largely blame itself. If Trump is the first postmodern president, it is because the left has spent decades championing a postmodernism that made language an instrument of will.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan knew. Forty-one years nearly to the day before Trump was elected to the White House, Moynihan delivered his famed address to the United Nations decrying the General Assembly’s resolution equating Zionism with racism. There is a symmetry, or rather asymmetry, between the events.

Reflecting later on the address in his book *A Dangerous Place*, Moynihan, a fierce liberal critic of the illiberal left in America and

abroad, said he objected not merely to the vilification of Israel but also to the corruption of language involved in the appropriation of the word “racism”: “I had wanted to speak to the issue of language; to say that to preserve the meaning of words is the first responsibility of liberalism.”

In that task, liberalism — or, rather, leftism — failed, and that is no small part of the reason Trumpism triumphed. Of this, the left seems astonishingly unaware. On Inauguration Day, a group of anthropologists protested Trump with nationwide “teach-ins” featuring, with no evident sense of irony, readings of Michel Foucault’s *Society Must Be Defended*.

In the lectures compiled in that book, Foucault characterizes truth as a weapon of power:

In order to characterize not just the mechanism of the relationship between power, right, and truth itself but its intensity and constancy, let us say that we are obliged to produce the truth by the power that demands truth and needs it in order to function: we are forced to tell the truth, we are constrained, we are condemned to admit the truth or to discover it. Power constantly asks questions and questions us; it constantly investigates and records; it institutionalizes the search for the truth, professionalizes it, and rewards it.

Foucault claims merely to be telling a story about the use of truth, but the implications of that story naturally devalue it. He proceeds to say that the philosopher “telling the truth, recounting the story, rediscovering memories and trying not to forget anything, well, that person is inevitably on one side or the other: he is involved in the battle, has adversaries, and is working toward a particular victory.”

“Discourse,” Foucault says, employing the word now pervasive in the academy, is always “perspectival.” The moment a claimant to truth seeks a particular and especially an empowering end, truth is no longer universal. “The truth is, in other words, a truth that can be deployed only from its combat position, from the perspective of the sought-for victory and ultimately, so to speak, of the survival of the speaking subject himself.” There is consequently “a basic link between relations of force and relations of truth” in the Western tradition, and thus the association of truth with “neutrality” is “being dissolved.”

It is difficult to see how, on this account, truth could be grasped or asserted in any way other than manipulation. By Foucault's reasoning, objective truth, if it exists, is inaccessible to real human experience.

This is misguided, for several reasons. One, unless Foucault was onto something that Aristotle missed, is the inescapable relationality of human beings, our inherently political natures. But to say that human beings are relational is not to say that truth is relative. Rather, Aristotle derives man's political essence from that which makes us unique among creatures, which is *logos*, the capacity of speech attached to reason:

For, as we assert, nature does nothing in vain; and man alone among the animals has speech [*logos*]. The voice indeed indicates the painful or pleasant, and hence is present in other animals as well; for their nature has come this far, that they have a perception of the painful and pleasant and indicate these things to each other. But speech serves to reveal the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust.

This is inherently an interpersonal, political capacity. The isolated individual has no need for *logos*. He who can share nothing or needs nothing "is either a beast or a god." Few of these walk among us, which means that the atomized individual is incapable of arriving at truth except in community with others. Given that the pursuit of truth is inherently a political activity, it is inseparable from the relationships that Foucault says distort it.

Of course, politics as an Aristotelian phenomenon is wholly different from and nobler than Foucault's mere imposition of power. But it is inherently associated with the notion of authority. In a complex society governed by a division of labor, we also have no choice but to recognize the authority of both eminent individuals and those with particular expertise.

That is not to say the individual surrenders his capacity of judgment. One substantial exercise of judgment is deciding to which authorities one should defer, and with respect to what and under what circumstances to do so. The point is that not all of us share comparable expertise in all the vast areas of life that a complex society must govern and on which we seek to have opinions.

We cannot all expect to have comparably informed views of topics ranging from medicine to metaphysics. Yet these are realms in which truth, even if unattained, exists. This does not mean truth must be

rendered merely technical or scientific. Nor does it mean governance is reducible to rigid truths cast in harsh blacks and whites. The progressive aspiration to scientific legislation notwithstanding, politics is much more often a matter of prudential judgment than scientific precision. Aristotle recognized as much in observing that the good and bad and just and unjust, while objective qualities, required the social capacity of *logos* to be approached.

But such judgment is often rooted in facts, and, even where facts are in dispute, judgment is conducted and conveyed in words. In his *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, John Adams likely (and characteristically) overstated the case in decrying Marchamont Needham's "[p]oetry and mystics," which is to say oratorical flourish, as poorly suited to the study of politics. "The simplest style, the most mathematical precision of words and ideas, is best adapted to discover truth, and to convey it to others, in reasoning on this subject," he asserted.

James Madison was more accurate in noting that words are an unavoidably imprecise medium, something he identified in Federalist No. 37 as a source of difficulty in constitutional drafting: "When the Almighty himself condescends to address mankind in their own language, his meaning, luminous as it must be, is rendered dim and doubtful by the cloudy medium through which it is communicated." That is all the more reason to preserve words rather than merely surrender to their use as pure instruments of will.

Yet this surrender is the continuation of a trend dating at least to the 1960s left, whose "great debasement of language" and "fantasizing of politics" Moynihan abhorred:

Upper-class lying — that the men in jail are political prisoners, that the fatherless child is happier, that the welfare system is a conspiracy to keep the proletariat passive — is destroying standards of discourse. The language of politics grows more corrupt. We have graduated a demi-generation of students who appear lost to reality. We are beginning to encounter middle-of-the-road politicians who will seemingly say anything. We approach a fantasized condition.

As Steven Hayward has noted, it is a condition that the far left, whose influence is spreading to mainstream liberalism, is poorly equipped

to resist given its long project to undermine the integrity of truth claims. The rapid diffusion and acceptance of transgender ideology, and the stigmatization of those who question it as bigots, illustrates the use of language as will. The bifurcation between “sex” and “gender”—the former held to be a biological reality and the latter a social construct—is a remarkably sudden etymological innovation that has swept through society from its source in the intellectual left in an astonishingly brief time.

The mutation of gender pronouns from terms reflecting objective, recognizable realities in the concrete world to expressions of individual will—with the extraordinarily individualized nature of the willing believing the claim that there is anything “social” about the construction involved—is but one example of the effervescence of language.

Its rapid-fire acceptance among mainstream and even partisan journalists, artisans whose craft depends on the integrity of language, is especially disturbing. A time traveler from a generation ago would read high-minded journalistic accounts of today’s disputes over bathroom access in vain to understand why there is any controversy over “girls” described with the feminine pronoun wishing to use women’s bathrooms and locker rooms. Only occasionally do the stories disclose, and then only in passing and often at the end, that the individuals involved are biologically male. Even the story on the Fox News website about President Obama’s commutation of Chelsea Manning’s sentence for disclosing troves of classified documents described the leaker as “she.”

Yet it is far easier to call someone “male” or “female” as a matter of objective reality than it is to say President Trump “falsely” described his inaugural crowds as “massive.” This is not a wholly surprising development. The press has long displayed a congenital allergy to objective truth, though, ironically, in the name of objectivity. Now, in the era of Trump, they are disarmed.

SERIOUSLY OR LITERALLY

In *Against All Hope*, his memoir of Fidel Castro’s gulag, Armando Valladares recounts, in excruciating detail, two decades of torture and neglect, including having human feces sprayed into his mouth and caked onto his skin for so long that fungi grew and had to be scraped off with the top of a tin can. He was once marched into a lake of sewage in which one of his fellow prisoners nearly sank and drowned. He was

beaten with everything from chains to truncheons to bayonets. He was fed maggot-infested remnants of rotted food.

When Castro died in late 2016, the *New York Times* gamely offered in a caption on its webpage that Castro was “seen as a ruthless despot by some and hailed as a revolutionary hero by others.” This is what passes for objectivity. It is the idea that any claim must be held equal and stated on equal terms with any other. There is no objective sense, however, in which Castro was a “hero” (defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as someone “distinguished by the performance of courageous or noble actions”) any more than there is an objective sense in which Donald Trump saw Muslims rioting in celebration in Jersey City on the afternoon the Towers fell.

Fair enough, the *Times* buried the word “hero” beneath the obfuscating mists of the passive voice — “was seen as” — but it similarly qualified what Castro most certainly *was* in any objective sense, provided words have fixed meanings: both ruthless (OED: “feeling or showing no pity or compassion”) and a despot (“an absolute ruler of a country”).

Yet what passes for fairness is telling two sides to stories that do not have them. There is a circle at work. The press must do this for the sake of credibility; if it had more credibility, it could simply state facts. There are attempts to do this now, desperately, as the Trump administration chokes off the media’s access to the White House. Reporters describe Trump’s statements as “false,” “exaggerated,” and “misleading.” One headline in the *New York Times* accused Trump of repeating a “lie.” Yet the press had never done so with other figures before. The irony is thick: It is the media’s discomfort with objective truth that disqualifies it from being believed when it calls Trump on his violations of objective truth now.

Of course, that politicians fib is neither shocking nor new. Hillary Clinton seemed as incapable of acknowledging the truth about her email scandal as Bill Clinton, dissecting and brutalizing the meaning of “is,” had been about his intern scandal. Trump’s practice is more insidious. It is a steady deflation of the currency of language through serial exaggeration, gratuitous superlatives, and, yes, reflexive distortion.

How literally should Trump be taken, especially when such penchants are well known? The journalist Salena Zito incisively said Trump’s supporters took him seriously but not literally, whereas his critics took him literally but not seriously. There is a great deal to that, and a great deal that it reveals.

It is neither possible nor prudent for every word in politics, any more than for every word in romance, to comply with the criterion of literal truth. But something is amiss with respect to the unique role words play in politics. When the best that can be hoped for on the international stage is that the world will *not* take the president of the United States at his word, because he systematically aggrandizes language and says things that are not meant to be taken “literally,” serious questions arise.

Barack Obama was right when he said that the words presidents use can start wars or move markets. That is a useful tool that ought both to be preserved and to be sparingly employed. Yet Trump uses language so promiscuously—he tweets with exclamation points and all capital letters even now, as president of the United States; he pledged in his inaugural address to “eradicate” radical Islamism “completely from the face of the earth,” something no serious person thinks possible—that it is likely the next chief executive will have to rebuild the linguistic credibility of the office. Indeed, one hopes that will be necessary, because the alternative would be that the world spends Trump’s presidency taking him both seriously *and* literally. One or the other will have to go.

The distinction between the literal and the serious also forces an artificial cleavage between speech and deed. A common refrain is that Trump’s speech is atrocious but his policies are defensible. Accepting this premise—which entails accepting a degree of protectionism, presidentialism, and other practices that have traditionally been anathema to conservatism—there is still the fact that policies receive their meaning, expression, and justification through speech. If speech lacks meaning, policies are imposed through patent will.

That is why the credibility of the office of the president is not all that is at stake. The presidency itself is already an inflated office in the constitutional system. Its credibility is vital, but the deeper threat is to the integrity of language itself.

THE CURRENCY OF REPUBLICANISM

The 1960s left did not invent the notion of language as an instrument of will, nor was Foucault the first to theorize it. That distinction belongs, perhaps, to the ancient Greek sophist and rhetorician Gorgias, immortalized in the Platonic dialogue whose title bears his name. In it, his interlocutor Socrates distinguishes between “conversation,” his method, and “oratory.”

Gorgias boasts about the use of language as a weapon of power that causes others to act as one wills by inducing a sense of conviction in them about the just and unjust. “[O]ratory,” he announces to Socrates, “embraces and controls almost all other spheres of human activity.” Yet even Gorgias, falling into one of Socrates’ legendary traps, claims the power of oratory can be used well or poorly—that is, rightly or abusively. For Foucault, the presence of power is itself inherently a stigma of misuse. The issue is what happens to political conversation when words are no longer attached to objective meanings in the observable world.

This is why Moynihan called the defense of language “the first responsibility of liberalism”—that is, liberalism in the classical sense, the kind of liberalism whose institutions maintain predictability and freedom, including the freedom of self-government. Words are the currency of republicanism. They are the liberal alternative to the imposition of pure power. And words with meaning are the alternative to the imposition of sheer will through the manipulation Gorgias described. Foucault, in short, is wrong. Words are not a means of coercion. They are the alternative to it.

In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides, recounting the revolution at Corcyra and the subsequent rebellions it unleashed across the region, understood the collapse of language as a symptom of the collapse of civil society:

So bloody was the march of the revolution, and the impression which it made was the greater as it was one of the first to occur. Later on, one may say, the whole Hellenic world was convulsed. . . . Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness; ability to see all sides of a question, inaptness to act on any.

The Judeo-Christian tradition for this reason sharply emphasizes the integrity of words. In Jewish thought, the importance of speech is signaled in the first lines of Genesis when it is the mechanism God uses for creation. Throughout Genesis, human words have the power to instigate realities, as in the case of Isaac’s blessing, which, though mistakenly

given to Jacob rather than Esau, sticks because it has been spoken. The Christian Gospel of John begins by paralleling Genesis: “In the beginning was the Word” — significantly, in the Greek, *Logos*. In Catholicism, the *Logos* is the second person of the Trinity, which makes whatever has being intelligible through words.

In politics, which is not a static affair, language does not merely reveal realities. It generates them. That is true in a double sense. One is the use of language by public figures speaking to one another, the public, and the world. Some deception and wordplay are, of course, naturally involved in statecraft and negotiation. But when the leaders of countries, or of the branches of our government, or of the Republican and Democratic caucuses, reach a bargain, they ultimately do so through the medium of language. They may lie, of course, and their credibility and thus effectiveness may suffer. But if the underlying language itself has no meaning, and is broadly understood legitimately to have no meaning because it has been deflated into nothingness, the exchange is not possible in the first place.

As Thucydides notes, this also makes the practice of public virtues impossible. If moderation cannot be distinguished from cowardice — a confusion Burke would later predict amid the ravages of the French Revolution as well — it can be neither exhibited nor recognized. If recklessness is confused with courage, it is incited.

Thus the second sense in which language matters: the inhibition of political conversation among the people themselves. We are apt to make mistakes when our language lacks clear meaning. As George Orwell wrote in his seminal essay “Politics and the English Language,” the subtext of which is that to control words is to control the levers of power, “But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”

This inability to converse is especially troubling in a polarized time. Americans are retreating not just behind partisan lines but also into private and disparate realities. The era of three major networks may have warranted complaints about bias, but at least political conversation could occur within a broad consensus about facts. Dispute thus pertained to their interpretation and implications.

Today 47% of Americans who identify as “consistently conservative” call Fox News their main source for news about government and politics, according to a survey from the Pew Research Center. Consistently liberal voters turn to a greater diversity of sources, but only because a

greater diversity of sources appealing to them are available: CNN, NPR, MSNBC, and the *New York Times*.

Social media accelerates the self-selection of news. According to the same survey, 75% of consistently or mostly conservative Americans say they see Facebook posts about politics that mostly or always align with their views. Liberals should not mount a high horse: They are likelier, Pew found, to hide from, block, “de-friend,” or stop following someone because of a political post. Some 69% of mostly or consistently liberal Americans have done so. Perhaps more disturbing, the more fixed people become in their views, Pew found, the less likely they are to speak with those with whom they disagree.

In this environment, plausibility is the new truth. Call it the new postmodernism. It was on display when Bill O’Reilly, author of a tract proffering the thesis that Ronald Reagan was mentally compromised while serving in the White House, all but came through the camera at George Will, whose column had discredited the book. O’Reilly began the interview by attacking Will for not calling him before criticizing his book, then proceeded to defend himself for not talking to principals in the Reagan administration before writing the book because they had “skin in the game.” For “proof” that Will was “lying,” O’Reilly cited Edmund Morris’s “biography” of Reagan, which was in fact a widely panned fictionalized memoir.

O’Reilly raged, willing the words to mean what he wanted. Will remained cool. Later, O’Reilly attacked Will again for having criticized Trump’s pressuring of Carrier Corporation to maintain jobs in the United States. “Drop the personal stuff,” O’Reilly admonished Will. “Tell the truth.” The truth was that Will had not said anything personal. The day after Trump’s inauguration, Fox declined to renew Will’s contract. O’Reilly remains on the air.

Meanwhile, on MSNBC, host Rachel Maddow piled up no fewer than four adverbs when she announced that then-President-elect Trump “blatantly, and overtly, bluntly, simply lied” when he said Russian hacking had not influenced the outcome of the election. Yet President Obama’s White House had said the election results “accurately reflect the will of the American people.”

She had previously said the Koch brothers had funded an effort to require mandatory drug tests for welfare recipients in Florida. They had not. She claimed John Kasich signed an Ohio law requiring transvaginal

ultrasounds for women seeking abortions. The law specified the ultrasounds had to be performed externally.

Devotees of such hosts are often not concerned with the truth so much as the plausibility of their claims. An alternative explanation for any phenomenon—which the media is always pleased to supply in the name of fairness, regardless of its truth—is adequate to provide cover for one’s pre-existing political views. Honest inquiry after truth is a thing of the past. And why not? The left has, for decades, told us it did not exist.

For that matter, a consistent conservative or consistent liberal exposed only to O’Reilly or Maddow might never know their claims had been debunked. The evidence indicates such a conservative and liberal would probably not encounter each other anyway. If they did, how would they communicate? Words would simply be instruments of political will.

LOGOS AND WILL

This, ultimately, is why it matters that President Trump misleads. It mattered that Hillary Clinton did too, but Trump won and now bears the burdens and accountability of leadership. Nor is it enough to say, as his advisor Kellyanne Conway did in his defense, that it is necessary to look at “what’s in his heart” rather than “what’s come out of his mouth.” We do not have direct insight into each other’s hearts. Isaac did not bless Jacob with his heart; he used words. The mechanism we use to convey our inner thoughts and feelings is speech. There is no alternative save force. Consequently, preserving the meaning of words matters.

It matters if, first, Aristotle was right that *logos* is the means of revealing the good and the bad and the just and the unjust and, second, if the good and the bad and the just and the unjust are matters of beauty and enduring importance. It is especially unbecoming of conservatism, then, to excuse Trump’s abuse of language. If Russell Kirk was right in two of his 10 conservative principles—that “there exists an enduring moral order” and that “conservatives are chastened by their principle of imperfectability”—then presumably the defense of that order requires an ongoing pursuit conducted through the medium of speech. If he was right in a third principle—adherence to “custom, convention, and continuity”—words are also the relevant medium, for they are the means of conveying tradition with consistent meaning.

This is not to say language and meanings do not evolve. They do. But even in that case, words retain meanings when they are spoken. There is a difference between language that evolves by decentralized percolation, gradually over time, and a sudden, top-down emptying out of the content of words altogether.

This is not to apologize, either, for liberal sanctimony. Trump is not an aberration. It is the argot of the left as expressed, *inter alia*, in the elliptical phrases of Foucault that dignified with theory precisely what Trump claims more crudely: that language is no more than will, merely power translated into words. The relativism long emanating from the academy leaves an institution to which we should above all be able to look for the pursuit of beauty and truth unable to speak in objective terms for either. If there is no objective truth, how is it possible to say Trump lied?

Foucault, of course, was ultimately wrong in another, more important sense. Words are not instruments of power. The destruction of words is an instrument of power. Orwell understood this. “You think, I dare say,” Winston’s friend Syme tells him of the coming edition of the Newspeak dictionary in 1984, “that our chief job is inventing new words. But not a bit of it! We’re destroying words—scores of them, hundreds of them, every day.”

No serious person believes President Trump, like the rulers of Oceania, has embarked on an insidious program to undermine the language to inhibit resistance. That too, would credit him excessively. The academic left can justly be accused of a deliberate effort to diminish the integrity of truth and language. The president seems, instead, to suffer from a sort of compulsion to exaggerate and distort, from a kind of defect of character with respect to the truth.

The point, rather, is that this compulsion, when expressed repeatedly by a president of the United States, is consequential. Presidents can help to normalize once-aberrant behavior. They are neither clergy nor saints, but neither are they disembodied policies. The integrity and credibility of the office is not wholly separable from the character of its occupant. Most problematic, the devaluing of the currency of republicanism—that is, *logos*—strips politics of the nobility of the good and the bad and the just and the unjust. All that is left standing is will. Perhaps it is not coincidence that—speaking as he does of winners and losers, the strong and the weak—will is the president’s forte.