

Jonathan Swift Explains Why We Don't Trust Politicians

In *Grantchester*, an English mystery show set in a 1950s bucolic village, Vicar Sydney Chambers teams with detective Geordie Keating to solve crimes. An exchange about a suspect is revealing:

Geordie: Is he trustworthy?

Sydney: He wants to be a member of parliament.

Geordie: I'll take that as a no.

Visceral mistrust of politicians is common among Americans too.

In 2019, the [Pew Research Center reported](#) that “Public trust in the government remains near historic lows.” It’s not a surprise to learn that, “Only 17% of Americans today say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (3 percent) or “most of the time” (14 percent).”

[The public's trust](#) erodes as politicians lie.

Writer and satirist Jonathan Swift is best known as the author of *Gulliver's Travels*. His 1710 essay, “[The Art of Political Lying](#),” explores the common occurrence of falsehoods in the political realm.

Swift explains that politicians apply the art of lying “to the gaining of power and preserving it, as well as revenging themselves after they have lost.” In other words, they lie all the time.

Do you dislike politicians who speak out of both sides of their mouths? Swift did too. Here's what he may have said to

recent candidates who opposed ethanol subsidies... until they realized they [had to run in Iowa](#):

There is one essential point wherein a political liar differs from others of the faculty, that he ought to have but a short memory, which is necessary, according to the various occasions he meets with every hour of differing from himself, and swearing to both sides of a contradiction, as he finds the persons disposed with whom he hath to deal.

Political lies are often not exposed until after the damage has been done. Swift wrote,

Falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after it, so that when men come to be undeceived, it is too late; the jest is over, and the tale hath had its effect: like a man, who hath thought of a good repartee when the discourse is changed, or the company parted; or like a physician, who hath found out an infallible medicine, after the patient is dead.

Reading Swift, the recent exposure of [political lies about the Afghanistan War](#) comes to mind. Over \$2 trillion spent, and thousands of lives were lost while lying politicians deceived the public.

Political liars did significant damage in Swift's era, too:

Here hath this island of ours, for the greatest part of twenty years, lain under the influence of such counsels and persons, whose principle and interest it was to corrupt our manners, blind our understanding, drain our wealth, and in time destroy our constitution both in church and state, and we at last were brought to the very brink of ruin; yet, by the means of perpetual misrepresentations, have never been able to distinguish between our enemies and friends.

Not only politicians lie; so do we, according to Swift, with

great regularity:

I have been sometimes thinking, if a man had the art of the second sight for seeing lies...how admirably he might entertain himself in this town, by observing the different shapes, sizes, and colors of those swarms of lies which buzz about the heads of some people, like flies about a horse's ears in summer.

Unlike in the political arena, commerce exposes those who lie in the marketplace. Advertisements might induce us to buy a product that turns out to be inferior, but then we never buy that product again. In human relationships too we tend to avoid those who lie. Politicians, on the other hand, are relatively insulated from the consequences of their lies.

At the end of the essay, Swift wonders, "Considering that natural disposition in many men to lie, and in multitudes to believe, I have been perplexed what to do with that maxim so frequent in every body's mouth, that truth will at last prevail."

Swift believed that truth rarely prevails until after considerable damage has been done. Reading Swift, we understand why our Founding Fathers put severe limits on the power of politicians.

If politicians continually lie to gain power and stay in control is it not wise to minimize their power?

We ourselves are not innocent. Millions of Americans cheer for the grandiose plans of their favorite politicians and enable their lies. Swift is clear that a politician's lie is strengthened by our eagerness to believe the lie of our favorite politicians:

A political lie is... delivered to be nursed and dandled by the mob. Sometimes it is produced a monster, and licked into

shape: at other times it comes into the world completely formed, and is spoiled in the licking.

If Americans disliked political lies in all forms – lies told by their favorite politician as well as lies told by those they oppose – wouldn't political lying lose its advantage?

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