

**THE INFLUENCE OF LYING  
UPON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS<sup>1</sup>**

In the field of International Relations Theory there are three real and authentic pillars of Realism: *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, *Theory of International Politics* and *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. All these books are written by leaders of the American School of International Relations (i.e. Hans Joachim Morgenthau, Kenneth Neal Waltz and respectively John J. Mearsheimer) and represent three stages of Realism: classical Realism, Neorealism (i.e. structural, defensive realism) and offensive Neorealism.

The last (but, surely, not least!) published book of John J. Mearsheimer, R. Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago (<http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu>) is a very serious one, upon a quite unusual topic: why political leaders had (or not) sometimes to lie in different problems related to the field of foreign policy.

The author emphasizes in *Preface*, in a classical manner, reasons which determined him to write this book. Also, some preliminary opinions on this topic are offered. Among others, we have to keep in mind especially the following sentences: "In essence, they (people, my emphasis, F.P.) believe that inter-state lying is business as usual in international politics. I tell my interlocutors that as a card-carrying realist I was inclined at first to agree with them, but after studying the matter I have come to believe they are wrong. There is just not that much inter-state lying. Of course, this is not to say there is none" (p. ix).

In *Introduction* two fundamental preliminary conclusions on this topic are inserted. "Specifically, I find that leaders do not lie very often to other countries, but instead seem more inclined to lie to their own people" (p. 6).

"Indeed, leaders sometimes think that they have a moral duty to lie to protect their country. Leaders do not always lie about foreign policy, of course, but they occasionally say things or purposely imply things that they know are not true. Their publics usually do not punish them for their deceptions, however,

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *Why leaders lie. The Truth about Lying in International Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, 142 p.

unless they lead to bad results. It seems clear that leaders and their publics believe that lying is an integral part of international relations” (p. 7).

Afterwards, John J. Mearsheimer assert a fundamental realistic *credo* upon state international system, happily related to the main message of this book.

“A leader has no higher obligation than to ensure the survival of his country. Yet states operate in an anarchic system where there is no higher authority that they can turn to if they are seriously threatened by another state. In the harsh world of international politics, there is no 911 number to call if a state gets in trouble, and even if there were, there is nobody at the other end to pick up the phone. Thus, leaders and their publics understand that states operate in a self-help world where they have to do whatever is necessary to provide for their own security. If that means lying and cheating, so be it. International politics, in other words, tends to be a realm where rules are often broken with little consequence (p. 8). ... **In contrast to the international system, the structure of a state is hierarchic, not anarchic** (*Ibid.*, my emphasis, F.P.).

Roughly speaking, we can say that the theoretical essence of this book – a direct outcome of a very serious study of international politics realized by John J. Mearsheimer – is encompassed in the pages 6-8.

The scientific approach of the author of the reviewed book is divided into 8 chapters (*What is Lying; The Inventory of International Lies; Lying between States; Fearmongering; Strategic Cover-ups; Nationalist Myths; Liberal Lies; The Downside of Telling International Lies*). In a classical manner, these chapters are followed by Conclusion (i.e. chapter 9), Notes and a useful (and General) Index.

In the first chapter, very exact and interesting theoretical considerations upon *Truth telling, Deception, Lying, Spinning, Concealment* are made.

The second chapter is also a theoretical one because the author takes into consideration seven types of “International Lies”: inter-state lies, fearmongering, strategic cover-ups, nationalist mythmaking, liberal lies, social imperialism and “ignoble” cover-ups.

The third chapter analyzes ten kinds of inter-state lies and four types of situations which encourage and promote this kind of lies.

In the introduction of the fourth chapter the author shows that “Fearmongering occurs when a state’s leaders see a threat emerging but think that they cannot make the public see the wolf at the door without resorting to a deception campaign” (p. 45). John J. Mearsheimer uses a lot of historical example in order to emphasize this assertion. Very interesting is also idea according to fearmongering is used more by democratic than authoritarian regimes.

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In the fifth chapter are denominated and explained in 2 subchapters (*Why leaders engage in strategic cover-ups; When strategic cover-ups are likely*) the subtle (or sometimes rude!) problem related to this kind of – actually – stratagem. The final conclusions of this chapter deserve very much attention: “The bottom line is that the likelihood that states will cover up a policy debacle or conceal a controversial policy is usually determined by the same set of conditions that influence inter-state lying, but with two important twists: covering up failed policies is especially likely in wartime, and concealing a contentious policy is especially likely in democracies” (p. 70).

The sixth chapter represents a short but clever synthesis of two fundamental problems: why nationalistic myths are created; why elite groups of a nation to create myths starts. Basically, are shortly presented the following problems: only SS Einsatzkommandos are responsible and culpable for Holocaust (a myth); foundations of American and Israeli nations were accompanied by violent processes (a real problem).

In my opinion, the seventh chapter is the most important from the whole book, because words liberal and liberalism (not lie or lying!) are usually associated with freedom and democracy. All the same, democratic leaders are using lies in the same manner as authoritarian rulers. A sentence written by Alexander Downes and quoted by John J. Mearsheimer is very instructive: “democracies are somewhat more likely than nondemocracies to target civilians” – p. 77 (in wartimes, my emphasis F.P.).

The next chapter is a kind of synopsis of the book, because are reviewed the following problems: the dangers of inter-state lying; the perils of fearmongering; the hazards of strategic cover-ups; the risks of nationalist mythmaking; the potential costs of liberal lies.

The end of the ninth chapter (Conclusion) is rather pessimistic for the future role of the USA, for peace and stability in a multi-polar world.

“The United States spends more on its military than the rest of the world put together; it has a robust nuclear deterrent and is insulated from most dangers by two enormous oceans. Given how secure America really is, the only way its leaders can justify ambitious global crusades is to convince the American people that relatively minor problems are in fact dire and growing dangers. Given America's global ambitions, therefore, we should expect fearmongering to be a constant feature of its national security discourse in the years ahead. This is bad news, because fearmongering not only can have a corrosive effect on democratic institutions, it can also lead to disasters like Iraq and Vietnam” (p.

102). By the way, we have a war in Ukraine now and the USA intends to defend this country.

At the end of this review, I would like to emphasize some personal conclusions. Undoubtedly, this book (actually, a Best-Seller) is very well written and the careful reader finds a lot of useful knowledge after he reads and understands it. But, as every human work, it is not a perfect one.

First, this book intends to analyze a topic with international dimension, but the Bibliography used is a Western (Anglo-Saxon) one. So, we have an Anglo-Saxon point of view on this universal topic, with many explanations taken from the history of Western Europe and the USA. In our multi-polar world, the role of China, Russia and Muslim world is more and more increasing but references to those entities are quite poor. Predictable behaviors of the Muslim rulers, those actions are generally coordinated by religion can hardly be explained (or cannot) by the pattern given by this book: those rulers consider that using of lies represents a sin.

*Ars longa, vita brevis.* If our European civilization (I mean Christian civilization from Europe, North and South America) will keep the first position in the world in the next decades (as I hope), this reviewed book could become a kind of *Il Principe* in the matter of foreign policy, at least for the European and American leaders.

Until then, it is an excellent and amazing book written by a scholar, “an officer and a gentleman” (in this respect, see the amazing film produced in 1982): John J. Mearsheimer. We wish him to write as many books of this type, for the benefit of international science.

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