

Phil Napoli:

By now, I think many of us are familiar with something Donald Trump said in the recent presidential debate. He said that in Springfield, Ohio, and I'm quoting here, "They're eating the dogs, the people that came in, they're eating the cats, they're eating the pets of the people that live there." As we all know, Trump was claiming that Haitian immigrants to the US are eating people's pets. And obviously it's been something that's been debunked as untrue. Trump was fact-checked on the stage but didn't back down from that contention.

Recently, The New York Times published an article titled Every Falsehood, Exaggeration and Untruth in Trump's and Harris's Stump Speeches. The Times said, in one speech, President Trump made 64 false or inaccurate statements while Kamala Harris made six such statements in the speech that they reviewed of hers. The point here, as we're all becoming increasingly aware, lies have become a central part of American politics.

To talk about this with us today is Bill Adair. Bill founded the Pulitzer Prize-winning fact-checking organization PolitiFact, and he's the Knight Professor of the Practice of Journalism & Public Policy here at Duke. His new book is entitled Beyond the Big Lie: The Epidemic of Political Lying, Why Republicans Do It More, and How It Could Burn Down Our Democracy. I'm Phil Napoli, I'm the director of the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy at Duke, and I'm thrilled to be subbing today as host of Policy 360. Thanks for joining us, Bill.

Bill Adair:

Yeah, thanks for having me. I'm glad you started with the eating dogs and cats because I think that was both the high point and the low point of lying in politics. It was a high point in the sense that there probably are few things in the campaign so far that have been fact-checked so much, that had been checked by many news organizations before Trump repeated the lie, and yet he said it again. They doubled down on it after the debate and continued to claim that there was truth to it. When he was challenged on it during the debate he claimed it was true. And so it's a perfect way to start our conversation because I think it represents sort of a milestone in lying in politics and we could build our whole conversation around that if we wanted.

Phil Napoli:

Yeah, it feels like a nice marketing hook for the book, doesn't it? As far as the book goes, let's start with the beginning of the book where you make a very interesting confession, a moment when you said that you lied about lying on C-SPAN. Could you talk a bit about that?

Bill Adair:

You bet. Well, you mentioned that I'm the founder of PolitiFact, so I am a veteran political reporter. I started at the St. Petersburg Times newspaper in Florida, became the Tampa Bay Times. I was the Washington bureau chief starting in 2003. And after a few years of doing that, I went to my editors and I said, "Let's start a fact-checking website." And so we started PolitiFact and that got a lot of attention. We were a key force in getting the fact-checking movement going. But when confronted with the question that often came up, which party lies more, I would dodge the question. So I begin the book with this scene. I was on C-SPAN, I was on a C-SPAN program that I loved and love called Washington Journal. It's a great program because it's nonpartisan. Viewers call in and ask smart questions.

Brian from Michigan called in and Brian asked, "Hey, Mr. Adair, I read in The Nation that Republicans lie more. Is that true?" And I said, "Oh, Brian, we don't keep score at PolitiFact." And I was lying. We did

keep score and I knew that Brian was right. Now, we didn't publish the tallies by party, but we did publish the tallies by individual politician. And yes, I knew that our tallies as well as my own experience indicated that Republicans told far more falsehoods than Democrats did. But like other fact-checkers, I didn't want to ever say that publicly because to do so would compromise my neutrality. And to say that would be to make it very difficult to go back to Republican politicians and say, "Hey, will you talk to me? Hey, can I get your explanation of this?" And so I dodged the question and lied to him and said that we didn't keep track. And I had used similar techniques when I had given speeches and my friend Glenn Kessler, The Washington Post fact-checker, had dodged the same question many times.

It's just what fact-checkers did and probably still do because it's not a comfortable place for fact-checkers to be. But what I say in *Beyond the Big Lie* is that we need to confront this asymmetry. We can't just go on pretending that there is some sort of equality. I've also come to realize that we can't ask fact-checkers to come out all the time and say Republicans lie more, Republicans lie more. That's not the job of the fact-checkers. Fact-checkers are journalists that are there to assess the accuracy of individual statements. But I think as a country, and I think in a broader way, we need to confront this reality because it's crippling our political discourse.

Phil Napoli:

Okay, so picking up on what you were talking about, so we think about the world of fact-checking right now and a lot of it rests within news organizations. If you think about the book like you've just completed, if you were still working at a news outlet, is this the kind of book you think you could have written?

Bill Adair:

No, I don't think that if you are a working fact-checker in particular, or if you are a working political journalist, that it would be very easy to write a book that comes out so directly and says, "Republicans lie more." It's an uncomfortable thing to say. It's not something people want to hear. I'm sure that there will be blowback that I'll get about it, but it's something, as I just said, I think we need to face. It makes it really difficult to have a conversation about public policy if one side is denying the facts about issues such as immigration, climate, elections. We need to accept facts and then have an adult conversation, but we can't if one side is rejecting those facts. And I think our political journalists are struggling with this asymmetry. If you have one team that is not playing by the same rules so to speak, it makes it really difficult for the journalists that are covering this to try to cover it in a way that presents the reality to people, but still gets the voices right and tells people what's really going on.

Phil Napoli:

Could you imagine the book itself then having an impact on how fact-checkers do their work, think about their work, present their work? I mean, you are, I don't know if it's your official title, aren't you the godfather of fact-checking? I think I've seen that somewhere. Bill Adair says, "Hey, we got to start calling it like it is."

Bill Adair:

Well, when I started to write the book, I was putting the emphasis on fact-checkers to do this. I now think that another entity needs to aggregate their work and call attention to this. But what I do think fact-checkers need to do is become more assertive in how they present their work. So I don't expect the editor of PolitiFact or the editor of factcheck.org to be giving speeches about which party lies more. I don't think that's realistic. But I do think that fact-checkers should become more innovative in how they

present their work and that they should consider that their role isn't just to put the information out there in old ways. Fact-checking in many ways is largely just producing content and waiting for people to come to it. And I think we need to look for ways that fact-checking can get to people more quickly and combat things that are not true more directly.

And so this requires a different kind of mentality. As journalists, we think, "Okay, well, I'm going to publish this and people will come to it and absorb it and then make up their own minds about it." But we need to think more that we're creating data that search engines could use to elevate accurate information. One of the things that our team here in the DeWitt Wallace Center helped develop is a common data standard that most fact-checkers in the world use that's called ClaimReview. So that can be used by tech platforms to identify accurate information and inaccurate information. And so in searches and now in AI, it can help identify accurate information so that people get results that are much more accurate and so that falsehoods don't show up in whatever's generated from search engines and AI requests.

Well, that's a different mentality for fact-checkers. Fact-checkers are journalists. They write articles. But we need to think about different ways that we're presenting this work. But I did, when I started to write the book, I thought, "Wow, the fact-checkers need to do a better job about this." I don't think the fact-checkers should go out on the campaign trail and crusade against the liars. I would love to see someone pull together all the fact-checks and show the patterns of fact-checking in the way that some of our researchers did as we were doing this book and do that on a continuous basis.

Phil Napoli:

That's exactly where I wanted to go next. We were talking about data. If you could tell us a little bit about the data that do form a good chunk of a backbone of the central claims of the book. On what grounds are you able to draw this conclusion that one party lies more than the other?

Bill Adair:

So basically two things went into that. One was interviewing people about those patterns and the reasons behind it, but also analyzing data from PolitiFact and The Washington Post fact-checker to look into the fact-checks that are published by them and see what sort of a disparity they showed. Now, this is not a surprise. You go back to tallies that various organizations have done of PolitiFact fact-checks going back to 2010, they have consistently shown that PolitiFact's fact-checks show more false ratings for Republicans than Democrats. And that indeed is what we found. And to give us even more assurance that it was a party-wide problem, we removed Donald Trump from our data set and found that that pattern was still true with Donald removed for both The Washington Post and PolitiFact. So in terms of the ratings by the fact-checkers, there's no question.

So then one of the things that I reflected on for quite some time was, "Okay, is it possible that there is selection bias here?" Because that's been a complaint by conservative critics for a long time. And so thought about that, talked to people about that, and concluded that I think, one, conservative critics probably will still reject my conclusions here and will undoubtedly say there is selection bias. But if I just take my big case study from the book and say, "Okay, is it possible that the fact-checkers are cherry-picking claims by Republicans and avoiding claims by Democrats that are false?" So I can tell you from my own experience at PolitiFact, we looked every day for false claims by both parties. That was our mission. We were trying to find things that were questionable by both parties. And anytime that anyone would say, "Hey, this politician said this thing and it's not true," we would look into it.

And we just didn't find, and this goes back to 2007 when PolitiFact started, we just didn't find that there was the volume from Democrats that there was from Republicans. And even as I was researching the book, Republicans would say, "Well, you never checked Hillary Clinton on the email server." Yes, we did. "Oh, you never checked this Obama claim about Mitt Romney." Yes, we did. We gave Obama a pants on fire [rating] for that.

So there really has always been a continuous effort by the fact-checkers to fact-check Democrats. And I truly believe that what you see in our data reflects reality. Now, will that convince my critics? No, I don't think it will because partisan feelings are very strong in this country. I liken it to basketball that we know in the Atlantic Coast Conference that the referees are biased against Duke. We just know that, they call things all the time in favor of UNC, and that's just the way the referees are. And so I can understand strong passion for a team. And so I know no matter what I said in that chapter that there would be criticism. But I do believe it reflects reality.

Phil Napoli:

The obvious question that arises from that, taking the patterns and the data at face value, is the why question. If you were to try to explain why this is a persistent pattern, it's a pattern that exists even when you take Trump out of the data, which I think is pretty striking, but if we were going to try to explain why these patterns persist, there's actually new research published this week in the journal Nature that shows a similar pattern amongst individuals on social media. So it seems that there is some intersection between partisanship and tendencies to disseminate falsehood. Where did you go as far as trying to explain this pattern and what did you learn?

Bill Adair:

So I talked to everyone I could and asked them that question, and that included Republican politicians, former Republican politicians, former Republican political operatives, Democratic politicians, Democratic operatives. Everyone I interviewed for this book, I asked, "Why is this the pattern?" And I got a variety of answers, and many people traced it back to Newt Gingrich and the rise of Newt Gingrich in the late-1990s many people said changed the culture of the Republican Party and created a mentality of anything goes. Sharp elbows came out and made the Republican politicians willing to say things that were not true because the ends justified the means. They wanted to win. And so Newt set the example with things he did as the leader in the House. And that sort of bled into the culture of the party.

Some other factors. A partisan media that not only doesn't question the falsehoods, but also echoes them. And part of that is economics. As we saw in the Dominion case when Fox News did not repeat the election lies from the 2020 election, it lost viewers. It was bad business to tell the truth. So that partisan media has found that there's money to be made in lying. And that has been a big factor, I think, in creating an atmosphere that has nurtured this culture.

Another factor, partisan gerrymandering. So a Republican politician now is much more likely to be in a gerrymandered district and only has to answer to Republican voters. Well, those voters are a lot less likely to say, "Hey, you were caught lying." So they are much more willing to just say what they want. So those are three big factors.

And one other interesting statement, and this came from Denver Riggleman, the one term Republican congressman from Virginia. Denver said that the Republican Party sees itself as part of an epic cause and that in their sort of battle that anything is okay, including lying. So anyway, put all those things together and you can really see a culture that says, "Hey, it's okay to shade the truth. Hey, it's okay to lie now and

then. Hey, it's okay to lie more often." And so when an extreme character like Donald Trump comes along, he fit into this culture.

Phil Napoli:

I'm thinking about a quote here and the background for this, obviously your data showed that Republicans tend to lie more, but we still see a fair amount of consistent lying amongst politicians in the Democratic Party as well. And you had this quote from former White House Counsel to President Obama, Robert Bauer, and what he said really stuck with me. He said, "I don't think you could separate politics from deception at all." And I was curious what your take was on that. That was a quote that really stuck with me.

Bill Adair:

I love that conversation I had with Bob. Bob was, we were at a bookstore in a restaurant in D.C., and Bob did this riff where to illustrate the importance of lying as a lubricant of politics, he did this riff where, "I'm with Bill Adair, one of the finest journalists of his generation." And so Bob's point was that that was a lie. And of course I was deeply offended that he didn't actually think I was one of the greatest journalists of my generation. But you raised something I think it's important to point out. Although this book discusses this asymmetry in politics, it does not let Democrats off the hook. It's not like Democrats never lie, and I don't recall the exact percentage, but Democrats are still responsible for a huge share of lying. And so we shouldn't look upon this as just a Republican problem.

Lying is a huge problem in our politics, and it makes it really hard to have an honest discourse on issues. It makes it difficult for voters to sort out the truth in political campaigns. And so I wrote this book not just to focus on the partisan difference, but to look at the issue broadly and to look at overall, why do politicians do this? And that to me was an interesting question that even though I had covered American politics for a long time as a reporter in Washington and before that in Florida, I don't recall hearing a journalist ask a politician, "Hey, why do politicians lie?" And so I did that, not just to get the partisan difference, but just to ask what do politicians get out of lying?

Phil Napoli:

And you tell some stories in the book, there's case studies of individuals whose lives have been dramatically affected one way or another by this dynamic that you just described. One of them is Nina Jankowicz. Can you talk a little bit about Nina Jankowicz and what she went through?

Bill Adair:

Yeah. My goal with the case studies, and originally I think I thought when I was going to write the book that it was going to largely be about the data and an analysis of the data. And I quickly realized that case studies were a really compelling way to tell different aspects of lying in politics. So I decided to focus on a few areas. One was to tell a story of how a campaign makes a calculation to lie. So I focused on how the Romney campaign made a decision to make a big lie against Barack Obama. I chose one of the people who stormed the Capitol on January 6th to show how someone could fall for the falsehoods about the election and decide to drive to the Capitol and then storm the Capitol and obviously get arrested and charged.

So in the case of Nina, I wanted to tell a story of someone who was a victim of lying. So Nina Jankowicz is an expert, and this was not intended, but it turned out that there was a nice coincidence here in that Nina is an expert in disinformation. She studied foreign policy and focused a lot on disinformation from

Russia. She was hired by the Department of Homeland Security to run a new group that was going to coordinate internally the efforts of agencies in the department that all dealt with disinformation. This group was given maybe the worst name of any organization in the federal government. It was called the Disinformation Governance Board. Now it's a terrible name for several reasons. One, it's a name that doesn't describe what it really was doing. It was really an internal coordinating task force. Also, it's a name that's very Orwellian. But Nina was perfect for the job because she was an expert in this and very dedicated to the cause of combating disinformation and misinformation.

So she was hired, spent a couple of months getting started and ramping up before the board actually got going. And then it got announced. The Biden administration did a really poor job announcing it. They rolled it out not with any systematic thoughtful rollout where typically you would go to Capitol Hill and brief key members of Congress and their staffs about this, describe what it is, answer to their concerns, particularly in a political atmosphere where there're concerns about censorship. Although the board had been conceived with that in mind and even in its charter addressed that concern, none of that happened. Instead, they just leaked to Politico that this board was going to start. Politico took a snippet about it, ran it in Playbook, Politico's morning newsletter, and that's how the board began.

Immediately, within minutes of its announcement, it became the subject of attacks from people on primarily Twitter. And people began digging up details about Nina's background. And soon after that, people started lying about what the board would do. They started saying that the board would be a ministry of truth, like the all-powerful organization in George Orwell's 1984. And they started lying about Nina and what she was going to do in the job, and the lies just went viral. And the Biden administration responded to this by doing nothing. The Biden administration just sat back and took these blows without responding.

And it was just a textbook case of how not to handle this. It was astounding how poorly the administration handled this. And all of this was terrible for Nina, whose life was turned upside down. Suddenly she's buying security cameras for her house. Suddenly she's putting chairs under her doorknobs because she's afraid that people are going to break into her house all because of these lies. The lies spread. Members of the House start saying them in press conferences and on the floor. Lie after lie, after lie, after lie, Nina starts getting threatened. It's just a terrible example of how political lies can turn someone's life upside down. So I focus on that and I followed Nina for two years to show what happened with her. She sued Fox News. I show that case as it goes through and what the personal toll is on one person from political lies.

Phil Napoli:

And as it turned out, of course, the Disinformation Governance Board went away.

Bill Adair:

Yeah, so what happened, and it was a real victory for the liars, the Republicans just kept up all these falsehoods about what the board would do, and the Department of Homeland Security responded weakly, and weakly like without much strength, and too late to the lies. And so eventually within a couple of weeks, they decided to put the board on pause, and then a couple of months later killed it. And so Nina resigned from the Department of Homeland Security. It was a victory for the liars. And it was really sad because this was an example of something where this could have saved the government money. There was efficiencies that were likely because of this coordination that would happen. It was never going to do what the critics said it was going to do. But really it was a case study in poor political communication. Because they communicated it so poorly, they just got clobbered. And so probably the Biden administration deserves as much blame for bungling this as the liars do.

Phil Napoli:

And this sort of takes us back to the question you raised before, which is why do politicians lie? One answer is because it can work. But any other dimensions, nuances to that question of why do politicians, why is it part and parcel of our politics now?

Bill Adair:

Well, I think the environment has changed. I mentioned a few factors earlier that gerrymandering has changed the dynamic of House districts. And so House members are not accountable to the kind of mixed electorate that they used to be. And of course the media now with a fragmented partisan media, it's just so easy to have a media that echoes your false talking points. And so members of Congress are rarely held accountable. And here's another problem that we identified here at Duke. We did a study about a year and a half ago that we ended up calling fact deserts. And this is a takeoff on the term news deserts, which is an area where there is little or no news coverage. And what we found is that there are large swaths of the country where there's no fact-checking. So that means that a governor, a state official, a state legislator, even a member of Congress, is often never fact-checked.

We looked at the frequency that a typical governor or member of Congress is fact-checked. And the answer is rarely. That's not good because it's like driving on the Autobahn. If you know that you can far exceed the speed limit without any risk of being held accountable, without any risk of getting a speeding ticket, you're going to break the law. In the case of lying in politics, there's sort of no deterrence. And so that's been a huge factor also. Things have really changed. And one of the things I would love to see is much more fact checking in more places.

Phil Napoli:

So the risk-reward calculus has fundamentally changed over time. And on that question of things you'd like to see change, this is the last question, but what I really appreciate about the book is that it contains not a paragraph or two, but actually a substantive chapter about suggestions, solutions, ways that we could address this problem. Can you talk about some of the types of changes in our news and information ecosystem that you'd like to see implemented?

Bill Adair:

Sure. So I identify two types. One that I was just alluding to is just more journalism. I think if we can get more fact-checking of politicians, I think that can be helpful. And that fact-checking also can be the basis for some of the other solutions I'll talk about in a moment. Now, I think people will read that and say, "Well, of course the fact-checker wants more fact-checking." It's the old story when you're a hammer, everything looks like a nail. But I do think that if you just have more journalists keeping an eye on politicians, I think that's a good thing. And obviously in the turmoil of the news media, particularly local news, we've lost a lot of that. In fact, I quote a Republican pollster, Neil Newhouse, as saying that's been a factor. So one thing I would really like to see is more fact-checking, particularly by conservative outlets.

There is some fact-checking from conservative outlets. The Dispatch in particular, a great conservative outlet, does political fact-checking. I'd love to see more of that. I used to think that an opinion site like The Dispatch would not be ideal for fact-checking. But Steve Hayes and his team there have shown that a good opinion outlet can also offer good solid fact-checking. So I'd love to see that from more conservative outlets. And the reason I say conservative outlets is of course that's the area where there's

been the most criticism of fact-checking. And so I think that can help us with the problem of building the credibility of fact-checking on the right. So that gets to the fact-checking side.

Then there's the how can we change the behavior of politicians piece of this? Can we do that? Now, that's bold. Can we get politicians to reduce their lying? I'm hopeful for this reason. Politicians lie because it's a calculation. They think that it pays off. They think that they get something out of it. So if we can adjust that incentive, I think we can reduce lying. So how can we do that? First you have to figure out what do politicians really need in their lives? Well, they need advertising. They need to reach their voters. And the prime way they do that these days, or one of the prime ways, is through tech companies and social media. It's much more valuable now for them to advertise directly to people in their districts and the key demographic groups in their districts that they need to reach than it is to go to a big broad audience using a broadcast audience through television. So it's entirely possible to get the tech companies to charge more for politicians who have worse records for fact-checking and less, charge lower rates, for politicians who have good records for fact-checking.

Now, some people will cry foul about this and we'd have to work out a good system where there's plenty of fact-checking. But if we could get the tech companies to be bold about this, the way that Facebook, now part of Meta, did when it established its third-party fact-checking program, that could happen. And so that's one way to do this.

Another way to do this, which borrows an idea from a conservative group, is to get politicians to sign a pledge. Grover Norquist, a real powerhouse in Washington, runs an organization called Americans for Tax Reform. Grover's had a huge effect on American politics by getting Republican politicians to sign a pledge that they will oppose tax increases. If we could get a similar pledge against lying in politics with a powerful character like Grover, we could turn lying into an unpopular thing. There's no reason that the Republican Party couldn't become the party of honesty. There's nothing to say that lying is part of either party's foundational beliefs. So either one of them could grab this, and really it should be part of both parties' foundational beliefs. So those are some of the ideas that are in my chapter that's called How Can We Stop the Lying? And I am optimistic that if enough people care about this, that we could change the behavior.

Phil Napoli:

Well, thank you, Bill. Thank you so much for joining the podcast today. Bill Adair is the Knight Professor of the Practice of Journalism & Public Policy here at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke. He is the founder of the Pulitzer Prize-winning fact-checking organization PolitiFact, and his new book is called Beyond the Big Lie. If you enjoyed this conversation, Bill was actually on the show back in 2022. He talked about lying then as well, and he told the story of one of the most famous liars in journalism. That's an episode you can find online if you want to check that out as well. And again, thank you, Bill. That's all for today, and thank you all for listening.

Bill Adair:

Thanks for having me.