

Year of the Big Lie

Fred Gardner

1970

Liberation News Service — Soldiers are shipping out for Vietnam from West Coast embarkation points at a rate that recalls the 1966 build-up—1,700 one day, 3,000 the next. The Oakland Army Terminal is so jammed with GIs on their way to war that hundreds had to sleep out in pup tents during the torrential rains of early January.

The number of men going to Vietnam will not be released to the press this time. Nixon understands that a bigger war requires bigger lies. His master plan is to change our idea of who we are as a people.

The old myth had it that we Americans are decent folks who admire Abe Lincoln and want, for foreigners, only free elections, an opposition press and enough protein. For a long time this self-image kept everyone smug and righteous while the cold warriors extended the empire through murder and intrigue.

But in the sixties it backfired. As millions of Americans were mobilized to kill in Vietnam, more and more stood up to say that the war violated their country's tradition and spirit. Lyndon Johnson yearned to tell people that their destiny is to do evil. He conducted government business while defecating, tortured his beagle in public, exhorting soldiers to bring home a coonskin for the wall. In the end, however, he was afraid to switch lies in mid-stream.

Nixon's not afraid; he's been doing it all his life. His political career, from the Hiss case on, has been built on gutsy falsehoods. The White House has called our attention to three polls so far in 1970 (or "the seventies" as they put it, stressing that it's their era to define). The first said that Richard Nixon is the man we admire most, followed by Agnew and Billy Graham. The most respected woman, we're told, is Mamie Eisenhower.

That whole poll was written by Nixon after he finished watching 14 straight hours of football New Year's Day. He heard broadcasters describe at least five quarterbacks as All-Americans—a mathematical impossibility made possible by the fact that All-Americans are determined by opinion and publicity.

The number one team in the country is also named; there is no objective procedure such as a tournament to determine who's best. Nixon himself consecrated Texas as number one. (Southern strategy at work and play.) He is now trying, likewise, to transform his political opinions into facts by applying the sports-world format to real-world matters. Here's a tip-off: Nixon's "poll" of respected Americans listed a top ten and a second ten, just like the glossies' All-American teams; and there were honorable mentions for next year's stars such as David Eisenhower.

Polls prey on the democratic instincts of the masses, the snobbery of the intellectuals, and the paranoias of radicals. Everyday people may have no feeling one way or the other about David Eisenhower but, reading that millions admire him, assume he must have something on the ball.

On the other hand, wise-asses who have contempt for David E. transfer that contempt to the people who (purportedly) look up to him. Radicals in particular should be suspicious of the 1970 polls, because we form our strategies—that is, we speculate about what is politically feasible—on the basis of "facts" provided by the Man. They could never convince us that, say, Mamie Eisenhower is our greatest woman; but they can convince us that millions of Americans think she is. We shouldn't fall for it. Just as we didn't fall for the liberals' smugness, we shouldn't be swept up in the national self-contempt the fascists are promoting. Both frames of mind lead to an inability to take political action; both are paralyzing.

I felt a twinge of the new defeatism when I read a poll showing that Americans were more upset about the publicity given Song My than about the massacre itself. Wow, we really are a nation of pigs.

But then it dawned on me that the poll was a total fake. People had been horrified by the massacre. Certainly my friends had been. And my co-workers, and the grocer and the people who give me rides. In fact nobody could possibly be upset about the story getting out except the government.

People just don't think that way; they don't say 'I wish that story hadn't gotten out.' People want to know the dirt. They might approve of the massacre—might—but it's a lie on the face of it to say that everyone is upset because the story got a big play. All of which leads me to believe that people do not approve of the massacre. In fact they deplore it, understand how and why it came to pass, and want out of Vietnam, now.

It follows that the third White House poll of 1970—in which we learn that everyone is now pro-war because of Nixon's speech—is a total shuck. He couldn't convince one mother that the war was worth her son's life. Not one kid was tuned in when he squinted and whispered hoarsely, "And now a word to you young people." If the cripples in the VA hospitals cried, those were tears of rage.

I have never been asked a question by a pollster. I have begun mentioning this to people in my travels (46 states, city and country) and find that they've never been asked, either. For a while I almost believed a Marxist who said that Gallup and Field have been cutting costs and maximizing profits simply by making up the answers. It was a relief to learn that this wasn't true; there are pollsters, and they operate out of a town in southwestern Missouri which they consider typical because of its geography and median age and income.

The pollster wears a sharkskin suit and a narrow, glossy tie which suggests to many "interviewees" that he is an undercover policeman. He waves a clip-board, the ultimate symbol of bureaucratic authority, which often triggers a Pavlovian obedience-reaction, particularly among veterans. "Do you approve of President Nixon's steps for a just peace in Vietnam?" It's almost impossible to answer No. If someone dares ask, "What do you mean 'just peace?'" the pollster demands a yes or no answer. Only when the ruling class itself is split on a question are the people permitted to be undecided in significant numbers.

The recent spate of blatant-lie polls makes me wonder about the Nielson ratings—I don't know anybody who watches Johnny Carson. And the census. Census takers also operate with clip boards, and may well be on to the pollsters shuck. Is it possible that key portions of the U.S. Census Report are untrue? I have long doubted that the country is only 11% black. Look around. Start counting. Eleven per cent?

I read in *Fortune* that Chicago is about to become a "majority black city." But as far back as 1961 I noticed that you ride for miles before you see a white face in Chicago. Chicago must have been a "majority black city" for years! The same is true of Newark, which only recently became a "majority black city."

The population of the United States may actually be 33% black.

The danger is that we, the people, will keep going on the basis of what they tell us. We shouldn't. We should believe our own eyes and ears, our own instincts. I'm not even buying the *World Almanac* in 1970.

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