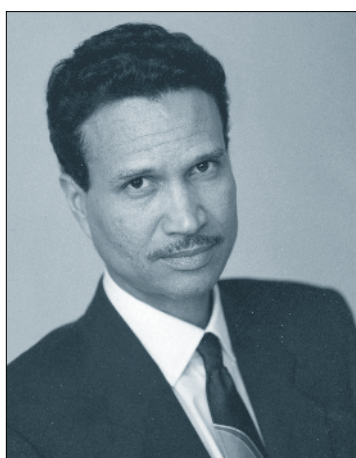


# Truth or Consequences

**We've been promised change. Now we must see to the fulfillment of that promise. Honesty about who we are and who we've been seems a good place to start.**



Archon Khephra Burns

**W**hich would you like first, the good news or the bad news? The question is often the prelude to a punch line. But truth be told, if we had our “druthers,” most of us would prefer to skip the bad news altogether, which is why some of us avoid going to the doctor, getting our physical checkups, balancing the checkbook or attending services at Trinity United Church of Christ. The Greeks of old believed that bad news infected the messenger, and bear-

ers of bad news were often slain outright. Today, in America, the media silence such messengers for us, as the Reverend Jeremiah Wright\* and Father Michael Flager recently learned first hand.

In our culture, as in others, too much honesty is seen as antisocial. How dare anyone rain facts down on our parade! If you see that the emperor (or the empire) is butt naked and ugly, the socially appropriate response, we are taught, is to keep it to yourself. But there's a danger in that too, as dramatized by Brick Pollitt (brilliantly played by actor Terence Howard) in the Broadway revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. “Mendacity, Sir,” Brick responds when Big Daddy Pollitt asks if he smells something unsavory in the room. The stench of mendacity that pervades the Pollitt home has driven Brick to drink. Like Brick, too many black folk in America self-medicate to anesthetize the chronic pain of the mendacity that pervades America's social and political life. We self-medicate with drugs, religion, sex, gallows humor, insulating cynicism or apathy and with Brick's drug of choice, alcohol. Or we just swallow the lies that make self-deception a distinguishing trait of our national character. Choose your poison. The options come down to facing the facts or perpetuating fictions.

An unflattering fact of biology may be that we can't help lying. We are by nature what David Livingstone Smith, director of the Institute of Cognitive Science at the University of New England, calls *Homo fallax* or lying man – weavers of a vast and intricate tapestry of guile that includes innuendo, ambiguity, omission, spin, phony smiles, hairpieces, breast implants and faked orgasms. We're taught to lie as children, even while being admonished not to, and are socialized to accommodate the lies told by

others. Parents deceive us with promises and stories and threats about the dangers extant in the world. And governments simply continue to treat us as the children we've grown to become, with orange alerts and fictions about WMDs and the blessings of universal democracy whether others want it or not.

Conversely, an inability to lie is now seen as one of the markers of autism and, of course, an automatic disqualification for employment in Washington or on Madison Avenue. The good news is we're not alone. Lawyers do it. Politicians do it. (Okay, maybe the news isn't that good after all.) Even preachers and beauticians do it. I do it, but I'm a writer; it's my job to spin truths out of fiction. That at least is the revelation that came to me some years ago when I was working in television and was frequently called upon to tout the virtues of certain celebrities as justification for the awards we bestowed upon them, not because they were virtuous or deserving, but because recognition attracts celebrities, and celebrities attract viewers, which attract advertisers and the revenues that pay the salaries of everyone working in television, including the producers who decide whom is deserving of such recognition. Ours were not malicious lies. On the contrary, my co-writer and I lied as Mark Twain would have had us lie: thoughtfully, judiciously and charitably, even healingly; the kinds of lies our mothers would approve of.

But as Mark Twain himself observed, there are liars and there are damned liars. The dominant news media today virtually secrete deceit in service of impression management and the manufacture of consent for policies not in our best interest. The bad news is we've been screwed. The good news, we might conclude from the lack of audible protest, is that we like it. But there may be a kinder, gentler explanation in what social psychologists have called the “bystander effect” – the diffusion of responsibility and the assumption that someone else will speak up, intervene and come to the aid of those under assault. No one does, as the studies have shown, and none will unless we do. We've been promised change. Now we must see to the fulfillment of that promise. Honesty about who we are and who we've been seems a good place to start.

\* There was very little in the Reverend Wright's sermon that is not documented in U.S. government sources – e.g.:

1970. Funding for a synthetic biological agent is obtained under H.R.15090. The project, under the supervision of the CIA, is carried out at Fort Detrick, the army's biological weapons facility. The U.S. intensifies its development of “ethnic weapons” (Military Review, Nov. 1970).

1975. Retro-virologists at Fort Detrick isolate a “virus for which no immunity exists.” It is later named HTLV (Human T-cell Leukemia Virus).

1986. According to proceedings at the National Academy of Sciences (83:4007-4011), HIV and VISNA share all structural elements, except for a small segment which is nearly identical to HTLV.