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Truth: One huge thing missing in this presidential campaign

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 2, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Neither presidential campaign has distinguished itself with its veracity. But there is a hierarchy of deceit in campaigns, as in life. I recall an incident during the 1976 campaign, perhaps apocryphal, perhaps not. Jimmy Carter had said he would never lie to the American people. A group of reporters came to Plains, Ga., to interview Carter's mother, Miss Lillian. One of the reporters asked her if her son had ever lied. She answered that he may have told a white lie, but that was all. The reporter persisted -- a lie is a lie, he said, then asked what the difference was between a white lie and other types. Miss Lillian said, "I am not sure I can give a clear definition of the difference, but I think I can give you an example of what we call a white lie. A few moments ago, when you reporters all came to the door, I said how happy I was to see you."

The biggest lie, one that afflicts not just the candidates but the country, is that a president is chiefly responsible for the economy. There are all manner of discrete decision-makers in an economy, from businessmen deciding whether or not to hire another worker to investors deciding whether to invest in a new company or keep the money in the bank, etc. In addition, the chairman of the Federal Reserve can make decisions independent of the White House that can have a huge effect on the economy. Congress, of course, can take actions -- or, more likely these days, fail to take action -- that will have a greater effect on the economy than anything a president can do on his own. And in this globalized economy, events in Greece or Spain or China, over which any president has little control, can tank the markets.

This lie is especially funny when it is perpetrated by Republicans. Gov. Mitt Romney says he is going to create 12 million new jobs if elected. Of course, the whole thrust of Romney's politics is that government does not create jobs; the private sector does. This is not so much a lie, then, as shorthand, but the deception is just as real. Candidates cannot promise that their plan, even if enacted entirely as they want, will necessarily achieve a given result.

Both campaigns have been known to take comments out of context. The Republicans ran ads against the president after his syntax left an exact but misleading quote to the effect of: "You didn't build that." The president was referring to infrastructure, but, if edited properly, one would think he was speaking about small businesses. Similarly, the Democrats took Romney's comment that "corporations are people, my friend," by which Romney meant corporations are considered individuals for legal purposes, and tried to make Romney appear like someone more comfortable surrounded by stock reports than by children.

Romney's famous comments about the 47 percent are different. In this case, the Democrats would like nothing more than for voters to listen to the entire, unedited tape, dripping as it was with contempt for those less fortunate than himself.

Republican warnings about the Arab Spring are the height of hypocrisy. They love protest mobs on the streets of Iran, but on the streets of Benghazi? Not so much. They champion freedom and its promotion, but consider the Arab Spring a disaster. They criticize the president for not doing more in Syria, but turn mute when asked what they would do. And then, like a cherry on a sundae, they accuse the president of inconstancy.

President Barack Obama, like candidates before him, likes to talk tough about China's trade policies, even though he knows talking tough with China is almost always counterproductive. But you can't admit that without appearing weak, because somehow to American minds, talking tough is more important than achieving the result one wants. He cannot say what he knows about Iran; namely, the reason the U.S. did not more forcefully support the democracy protests was the fear that being tied to the U.S. would actually hurt those protesters, not help them. And so, he plays along.

As the debates begin, Americans want to see the issues discussed, but the issues are only discussed in this kind of campaign-kabuki manner. Romney and Ryan fret about the budget deficit, then promise trillions in dollars of new tax cuts for the super-rich. Obama promises to grow the economy from the middle out, but he, too, is very imprecise about the details, which is not exactly a lie, but it is the kind of mental reservation that was so obnoxious to the founders, steeped in Elizabethan fears of Jesuitical plots, that every federal officer takes an oath that specifically states they do so with out mental reservation. (Except, of course, the presidential oath, which is prescribed by the Constitution.) Viewers may get clarity in the debates. They may see their instincts about the candidates and their policies confirmed, or they may see something that surprises and causes them to re-evaluate their prior stance. But, truthfulness? Not so much.

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