Has a tradition of attempting to weave a more interesting tapestry of our lives made us

A Nation of Liars?

By Laban Carrick Hill

A few months ago G.B. Trudeau's comic strip, *Doonesbury,* featured a scene where Mark, the son of a corporate magnate, sat at his father's bedside. His father looked old, perhaps on his deathbed. In the strip the father and son were discussing the father's war memoir, *Hell in Triplicate*, a title that suggests Mark's father spent the war years out of danger, shuffling papers at a desk. As Mark stumbled over strained compliments, such as "a fresh perspective," to praise and in a sense validate his father's war experiences, the older man finally grew impatient and acknowledged the essential problem with his memoir: "But one that nobody cares about, right? They don't make movies about company clerks."

ROB FRANKLE

In this comic strip, Trudeau exposes a core conflict in Western culture. We are a society that idolizes the hero and holds ourselves, and everyone else, to this heroic standard. In a sense, if you have not passed through trials of fire, or pulled yourself up by your bootstraps, you do not deserve admiration. Not surprisingly, this is a tradition that is deeply imbedded in our cultural history. Even Homer's *Odyssey*, one of literature's earliest surviving epics, plays out the "drama of the hero." Near the end of his journey, Odysseus washes up on the shores of the Isle of Skhería, where he is treated with all the polite respect that the culture demands for its guests. But once his true identity as the hero of the Trojan War and the survivor of many deadly trials is revealed, he becomes the focus of even greater courtesy.

In contrast, Odysseus' son, Telemachus, faces his own trials, minor as they are, and finds humiliation his reward. As a mere boy who has accomplished no significant deeds, he is barely noticed by the suitors who have encamped in his father's home to woo his mother. To compound the insult, when Telemachus gathers the courage to get rid of these men, he is cast out. Telemachus is clearly not of heroic stature, and his fate demonstrates this. The 19th-century English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson made this conflict one of the themes of his poem "Ulysses" by portraying Telemachus's destiny in the "slow procedure to make mild/ A rugged people." Telemachus is not the hero, but the paper shuffler, the clerk who makes the community run; he endures no Homeric trials. He is the man who lives that life of "quiet desperation" so famously evoked in Thoreau's *Walden*. Sociologist Steven M. Gorelick of the City University of New York has described "the powerful feeling of shame and embarrassment that comes from looking back at a time of agonizing moral choices and realizing that as others faced down the Viet Cong, the Chicago police, the fire hoses unleashed by the Birmingham police, I chose nothing, absolutely nothing."

In *Doonesbury*, Mark's father has had to make a similar uneasy peace with his prosaic fate. Susan F. Wiltshire, professor of classics and chair of the Department of Classical Studies at Vanderbilt, reminds us that even Telemachus had to confront this truth in the *Odyssey*. She recalls the moment when Telemachus and Athena, disguised as Mentor, are sailing to Pilos to ask King Nestor for news of his father. "Telemachus feels that he does not have the authority to speak to someone like Nestor who is so great," explains Wiltshire. "Athena then responds by telling him that his imagination and his intelligence will give him the words he needs." The message here is clearly that he must trust that who he is has sufficient value.

Not everyone, however, is capable of such acceptance. In fact, a person may find the truth of his or her mundane life so intolerable and valueless that he or she must fabricate a heroic past that corresponds more appropriately with his or her self image as someone better than an anonymous cog in history. Bart Victor, the Cal Turner Chair of Moral Leadership at Vanderbilt, sees this phenomenon in terms of class structure. A person on the outside of one group seeks to be accepted and so creates the traits that give him membership. Victor suggests that the person who lies about his or her past sees himself or herself as "not being part of the elite group, but is aspiring to be a part of it. In a sense, it is attempting to be who you aren't because who you are is not acceptable." He cites George O'Leary, the momentary Notre Dame football coach, who falsified his résumé by listing a master's degree in education and three years of college varsity football play because "he was a small-college football coach who felt he could not play with the big boys without a better, more impressive past."

Not all lying, however, is done to increase one's prestige or *gravitas*. One might tell a friend that her haircut looks great even though one's true feelings are the opposite. One might also lie for self preservation, such as telling a mugger exactly what he wants to hear. These lies can somehow be morally justified, while a lie made to gain the kind of admiration bestowed on heroes cannot. Gorelick sees these people as succumbing to the "powerful pull one feels to create a past courage and commitment." Wiltshire cites the *Odyssey* in attempting to characterize what is wrong with lying about one's past. "Remember, the first adjective applied to Odysseus in the first line of the *Odyssey* is 'Polytropos'—a man of many turns. That he is an artful dodger defines him and probably saved his life many times. In him, at least, I admire the gift for storytelling (which had two meanings at least when I was growing up). How is this different? One seems bold, the other pathetic."

John Lachs, Centennial Professor of Philosophy and senior fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Studies at Vanderbilt, characterizes this more contemporary fabricating impulse in terms of a person's need to "create more credibility for himself when he takes a stance of X or Y. It's almost as if the logic of your position compels you into creating a more authentic story." He chooses the example of King George III of England to explain what he means: "George III was the first British king not to lead his army into war. He was so upset about not doing this that he came up with war experiences. It wasn't that he lied. It was a total self-deception. When you lie, you tell a falsehood. Some people create facts about themselves, and they absolutely think they are true. So to them, they're not lying."

Over the years numerous highly respected public and private figures have been "outed" for these kinds of fabrications.

- One of the stranger inventions is the story of 28-year-old James Hogue, who in 1988 changed himself into an 18-year-old Hispanic named Alixi Santana. *The New Yorker* writer Tad Friend chronicled Hogue's extraordinary fabrication of his life as this extremely precocious, self-taught long-distance runner who grew up herding cattle in the remote reaches of the Mojave Desert. By creating this new, improved past, Hogue was able to win a scholarship to Princeton University where he distinguished himself, both academically and athletically, until the truth was accidentally discovered.
- Perhaps the most internationally infamous case is the one of Nobel Peace Prize-winner Rigoberta Menchu. Her autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchu, an Indian Woman in Guatemala*, recounted the horrors wrought by Guatemalan authorities against her as a peasant. The only problem about her "eye witness" account was that many of the events recorded were fabrications. She was not uneducated. Her father was not engaged in a long struggle to keep from being dispossessed of his land by rich ladinos, but by his in-laws. And she did not witness her brother, Petrocinio, burned to death by the government death squads. He was killed by them, but he was shot, and she was not present. Ever since these revelations became public, supporters and critics have battled over her story, calling into question her entire narrative, even the parts that are truthful.
- One of the more notorious cases was the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Joseph Ellis's claims of being a Vietnam veteran. For years Ellis regaled his students at Mount Holyoke College about his experiences in the jungles of Vietnam even though he had no military experience. For some reason, he felt compelled to invent a tour "in country" with the airborne despite the fact that his actual résumé was certainly of sufficient prestige to impress even the least informed teenager.
- Equally disturbing is the story of "exiled" Palestinian intellectual Edward Said, who has commanded immense influence for his powerful analysis of the Palestinian plight. For years Said claimed he spent his youth in Jerusalem, but was forced by the Zionists who established Israel in 1948 to become a refugee in Egypt. In 1999, however, Justus Reid Weiner reported in *Commentary* that Said never lived in Jerusalem. Instead, he grew up in Cairo, the son of a Palestinian who had emigrated to the U.S. in 1911 and became an American citizen before settling in Egypt. Consequently, he did not attend St. George's Anglican Preparatory School in Jerusalem, and the place in Jerusalem where he posed for documentary cameras and magazine profiles was never the site of his home. Unfortunately, much of Said's authority as a Palestinian spokesman derived from this counterfeit personal history.
- One of the most tragic is the case of Admiral Jeremy "Mike" Boorda, who committed suicide when journalists confronted

him about wearing Vietnam combat decorations he might not have earned. Boorda was the first sailor in the Navy to rise from the lowest enlisted rank to become a four-star admiral and later the supreme commander. He was one of the most highly respected officers in the service. When his integrity came into question in respect to whether he deserved to wear two tiny brass "V" pins, which signify valor, for having earned the medals in combat, Boorda killed himself. After his death the secretary of the Navy, John H. Dalton, inserted into Adm. Boorda's official record a letter from the former commander of the Navy, Adm. Elmo R. Zumwalt Jr., declaring that Boorda was eligible to wear the decorations. Questions still exist, however, surrounding Boorda's privilege to wear the medals since the actual combat missions he was supposed to have participated in have never been specified.

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On the surface these lies seem to offer little benefit beyond an increase in credibility, authenticity, or authority, while the downside—humiliation, loss of job, public derision—is enormous. What would make people fabricate portions of their lives?

Bella DePaulo, a University of California psychologist, has studied lying in American culture and has found that in 20 percent of the interactions that last more than 10 minutes, Americans are likely to utter a fib. Are we simply a nation of liars, or is there a deeper malaise of which these fabrications are only a symptom?

In University of California historian Karen Halttunen's classic study *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, she concludes the rise of corporate culture in the second half of the 20th century and its emphasis on having a "winning image" probably has more to do with decreased value in real achievements. The hallmark of mid to late 20th-century success manuals has been "their lack of interest in the substance of success" and the "candor" of their insistence "that appearances—'winning images'—count for more than achievement." This has certainly proven true with the many dot-com companies that garnered major investments without ever having earned a cent. Halttunen writes, "This replacement of the captain of industry with the confidence man in the American success mythology clearly demonstrates a critical shift in middle-class attitudes toward the sincere ideal."

In short, sincerity or authenticity is not nearly as prized as the appearance of greatness. Our culture prizes the myth of the success story—the Potemkin hero—more than it values the prosaic truth. "The consequence is that you get politicians all telling log cabin stories and running away from stories of privilege," explains Victor.

According to John Sloop, associate professor of communication studies at Vanderbilt, the end result of placing so much value on the veneer of the heroic is "to add to the general cultural cynicism. It ultimately makes everybody's background suspect." As a result Victor suggests that trust functions in an episodic fashion. "We take these hits, and because we need to trust, we try to find other places to put our trust. We have just gone through a period where the business class has been lionized and achievement in business was utilized as a signal for trust. So we wanted politicians and civic leaders who were successful in business. Now that has been eroded by the ENRON disaster, and so we're in the process of shifting our trust to military figures because we are in a time of war."

This basic need to trust ensures that people will be repeatedly duped. Most recently, the *New York Times* reported on a woman, Sanae Zahani, who made the rounds of the aid organizations after Sept. 11. Zahani told aid workers she was looking for her sister who might have been working as a temp at the World Trade Center towers. She enlisted the help of many New Yorkers in her search and was welcomed in their homes. She volunteered at the family assistance center at Pier 94, filed a missing persons report, and gave DNA swabs from inside her cheek. She even appeared on *The Rosie O'Donnell Show*, speaking haltingly of losing her sister. Over the weeks after the attack, Zahani "sought little beyond compassion and she grieved what seemed a real grief," according to the *Times*.

Sanae Zahani lost no sister in the tragedy and is one of the first to be caught fabricating a connection to America's worst terrorist attack, but surely she will not be the last. As time passes, more and more people will likely claim to have been at "ground zero" on that fateful day.

Being suspicious of such stories does not necessarily have to degrade our trust, however. We must make distinctions between the types of trusts and beliefs we can accept at face value, like our expectation that cars will stop for us, and those suspicions that make citizens fire off Freedom of Information Act requests to the government. The difference might seem obvious, but in a culture where accepted truths are increasingly called into question, knowing where the limits of relativism lie can be a remarkable comfort. V

Alumnus Wages Campaign to "Out" Bogus Veterans


ROB FRANKLE

"Everybody lies," reflects B.G. "Jug" Burkett, BA'66, a Vietnam veteran who is legendary among journalists, law enforcement and veterans organizations. "I've told white lies, but not on my military record." Through sheer, dogged determination, Burkett has waged a one-man war "outing" bogus vets who have lied about their war records.

"Burkett has provided a real service, and he's gotten people to be more skeptical of some of these claims that will encourage a greater honesty [about the war and its consequences on the soldiers who served there]," explains Thomas Schwartz, associate professor of sociology at Vanderbilt. "He was the first person to go out and start looking at Veterans' claims. He didn't buy the general image of the Vietnam vet. He went out and said, 'Hey, look, we're not all nuts. We didn't all oppose the war.' Because of his own experiences and his own dislike of the stereotypes, he went out and did something about it."

What Burkett found was that many claiming to be damaged by their service in Vietnam were never stationed "in country" or were never in the military. According to Burkett, of the 8.7 million men and women who served either in the military, the National Guard or the reserves during the Vietnam era, only 2.7 million were actually in Vietnam. Of those few million, only 15 percent were sent into combat. In fact, Burkett has amassed an astonishing wealth of data to suggest Vietnam vets are not the "damaged goods" of popular mythology. His research has found that 71 percent of those who served in Vietnam have gone on to attend college. Vietnam veterans have a higher per capita income, higher home ownership rate, less incarceration, and less drug addiction. Even today, with unemployment hovering around 6 percent, among veterans the unemployment rate is barely above 3 percent. "They are the most employed sector of our society," claims Burkett. "But what has happened is that the other image that was created by the anti-war movement during the war—the dysfunctional killer—became Hollywood's popular myth. Then it became institutionalized."

Burkett, a financial consultant for Salomon Smith Barney, stumbled upon this disconnect which has become a second career. "I was co-chairman of the Texas Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and I thought I would just knock on the door and say, 'Hey, I'm this worthy cause. Texas lost 3,500 men, et cetera . . . .' The universal attitude, however, even among people in pockets of money I knew, was why would we give money to those bums. It sort of shocked me because I didn't serve with any bums. They were the cream of the crop of my generation. I realized then that what I had carried with me all these years was not the public perception, and so raising money was a nightmare." Burkett approached this challenge the only way he knew how. He began researching Vietnam veterans in the National Archives, filing hundred of requests for military documents under the Freedom of Information Act. What he uncovered was a massive distortion that has cost the U.S. taxpayers billions of dollars. Burkett's work has toppled national political leaders and put criminals in jail. The rogues gallery of falsifiers includes such well-known public figures as the actor Brian Dennehy; Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Joseph Ellis; former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke; Adm. Jeremy "Mike" Boorda, chief of naval operations at the Pentagon; Texas Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter President and National Committee Chairman John Woods; plus many more phony heroes in communities across the country.

In his book *Stolen Valor*, written with Glenna Whitley, Burkett reports on the dozens of pseudo vets, including killers who have lied about having post-traumatic stress disorder to beat murder charges, sham war heroes featured in award-winning documentaries, and con men who have parlayed their lies of heroism into bestselling biographies and national acclaim.

"Why people take the risks given the chance of exposure and subsequent humiliation—I'm not sure," ponders Schwartz. With Burkett ready to fire off a Freedom of Information Act request, many now think twice about padding their military record.

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