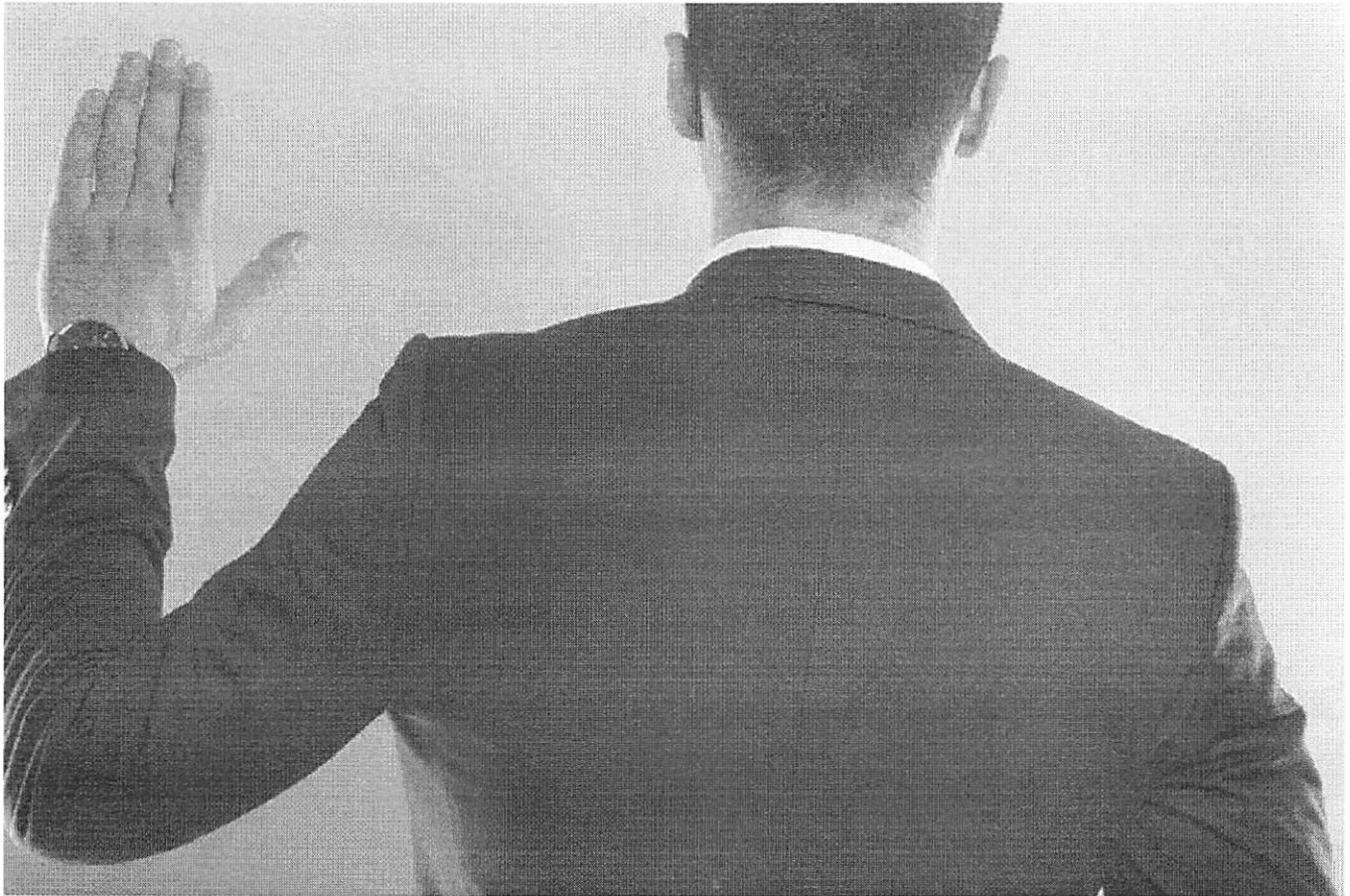


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[ETHICS](#) | [INTEGRITY](#) | [GEORGE SANTOS](#)

Lies, Damned Lies, and George Santos

Dismissing Santos' lies endangers truth, accountability, and democracy.

By Russell P. Johnson | JANUARY 27, 2023



News reports over the past few weeks have chronicled the litany of lies that George Santos told on his path to becoming a Republican congressman for the state of New York. Impersonators on [The Tonight Show](#), [Saturday Night Live](#), [Jimmy Kimmel](#), and [The Late Show with Stephen Colbert](#) all pilloried Santos for falsifying his past achievements. You know you've done something bad when the nation collectively lights a Bat-Signal for Jon Lovitz to come back on the air.

There's a lot to laugh about, but the realities revealed by the Santos case are troubling. The first and most immediately unsettling fact is that Santos has not yet faced substantive consequences for lying to New York voters. He was sworn in and appointed to two House committees. Mounting legal troubles and the possibility of an indictment may result in his leaving office or being removed from these committees, but so far [the Speaker of the House has not taken action](#). The second unsettling

fact is that Santos is setting a precedent for future political hopefuls. Even if other candidates do not lie as flamboyantly as Santos has, actions like his can shift the boundaries of what counts as acceptable gamesmanship in the pursuit of power. It's like driving on the highway—if someone is going twenty miles per hour over the speed limit with impunity, everyone around them feels more comfortable going fifteen over. If Santos keeps his seat, more politicians will try to catfish voters in their districts. The third unsettling fact is that Santos's lies—and in particular the way he talks about those lies after the fact—contribute to a growing sense of apathy about truth-telling.

As Hannah Arendt writes, “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.” For Arendt, an individual lie damages the fabric of a society, but this fabric can be patched and repaired. What is much more dangerous is creating an environment in which lying is normalized. Indifference to the truth damages society in ways that are much more difficult to fix. Thus I'm less worried about Santos claiming to be a volleyball player than about how his subsequent half-apologies and the relative indifference of his party members make it seem as though Santos was only doing what the rest of us do all the time.

When Santos spoke to the press after his lies had been revealed, he said, “My sins here are embellishing my résumé.” Two things stand out about this statement. First, by calling his lies “sins,” he rhetorically paints his critics as moralizing Puritans rather than voters who have every right to hold him accountable. Second, by describing his action as “embellishing,” he asks us to view him as an old storyteller adding a few inches to a fish rather than a candidate seeking political gain by inventing a false past.

When asked about his claims that he worked at Citigroup, which he never did, Santos blamed a “poor choice of words.” This makes it seem as though he used ambiguous language in an interview once and was later misconstrued. The actual words, however, were that he “began working at Citigroup as an associate and quickly advanced to become an associate asset manager in the real asset division of the firm,” and these words were on his official campaign website.

Santos has often referred to his lies as “exaggerations” and admitted that he added “a little bit of fluff” to his résumé. But this “little bit of fluff” involves saying that he was a “proud American Jew” and that he graduated from Baruch College, neither of which are accurate. Jennifer Lopez spent more time studying at Baruch than Santos did. No definition of “exaggeration” includes fabricating a four-year degree.

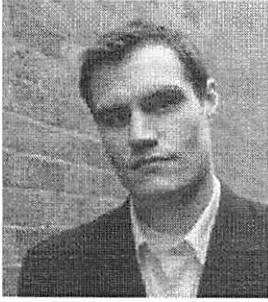
Throughout his campaigns, Santos has been enabled by party members who had their suspicions but did not deem the situation serious enough to intervene. One Republican leadership aide said about Santos's lies during the race, “It was a running joke at a certain point. This is the second time he's run and these issues we assumed would be worked out by the voters.”

This, to me, is the most insidious implication of the Santos story. As Albert Bandura has argued, euphemistic language makes it harder for people to realize that a moral boundary has been crossed. If people characterize Santos's lies as exaggerations, embellishments, fluff, a poor choice of words, or simply something to laugh off, it contributes to what Michiko Kakutani calls “the death of truth.”

Religious traditions and ethicists offer different answers to the question of whether it is permissible to lie in situations of extremity or for the well-being of the person being deceived. But across traditions, there is a general consensus that lying is almost always wrong and that there are grave dangers when a society becomes lax in its commitment to truth-telling. Anabaptist Christians, for example, do not swear oaths in courtroom settings. One justification for this refusal is that the notion that one swears to tell the truth only under certain conditions reinforces the cultural presumption that lying is permissible under ordinary circumstances. For Thomas Aquinas, veracitas or truth-telling is a social virtue closely related to justice. As with any virtue, it requires habitual practice in order to become truthful, and the virtue of truthfulness is easiest to cultivate in a society that esteems truth-telling and facilitates the behaviors that train people to be truthful. In some Islamic traditions, it is said that if every evil were kept in a room, the key to that room's door would be lying. In the Vedas, truth is not simply something individual people should commit to telling; “Truth is the base that bears the earth.”

It is vitally important, then, for societies to resist an easy slide towards indifference to truth, to preserve the ability to call a lie a lie, and to demand that leaders tell the truth to the people they work for. There are some voices within the Republican Party who are demonstrating that their commitment to truth surpasses partisan advantage. Let us hope that those who care about integrity get the last laugh.

Featured images by Catalin Pop/Adobe Stock and U.S. House Office of Photography



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