

MARTIN JAY



THE VIRTUES OF MENDACITY  
ON LYING IN POLITICS

## The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics (Richard Lectures)

By Martin Jay

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### The Virtues of Mendacity: On Lying in Politics (Richard Lectures) By Martin Jay

When Michael Dukakis accused George H. W. Bush of being the "Joe Isuzu of American Politics" during the 1988 presidential campaign, he asserted in a particularly American tenor the near-ancient idea that lying and politics (and perhaps advertising, too) are inseparable, or at least intertwined. Our response to this phenomenon, writes the renowned intellectual historian Martin Jay, tends to vacillate—often impotently—between moral outrage and amoral realism. In *The Virtues of Mendacity*, Jay resolves to avoid this conventional framing of the debate over lying and politics by examining what has been said in support of, and opposition to, political lying from Plato and St. Augustine to Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss. Jay proceeds to show that each philosopher's argument corresponds to a particular conception of the political realm, which decisively shapes his or her attitude toward political mendacity. He then applies this insight to a variety of contexts and questions about lying and politics. Surprisingly, he concludes by asking if lying in politics is really all that bad. The political hypocrisy that Americans in particular periodically decry may be, in Jay's view, the best alternative to the violence justified by those who claim to know the truth.

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*By Martin Jay*

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Many works have dealt with lying and with politics, and some have dealt with the two themes together. But nobody has done quite what Jay does. He gives us an erudite survey of much of the literature on lying since Plato, then offers us a tour of the literature on 'the political,' and then, finally, brings the two into confrontation with each other. It is possible that this is Jay's best book. In any case, it will surely become a primary reference point for anyone who wants to think seriously about lies and lying.

(Allan Megill, University of Virginia *author of Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice*)

Erudite.... [A] fascinating history of politics' enduring struggle with lying.

(*The Nation*)

#### About the Author

Martin Jay is the Sidney Hellman Ehrman Professor of History at the University of California–Berkeley, and the author of *The Dialectical Imagination and Downcast Eyes*.

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