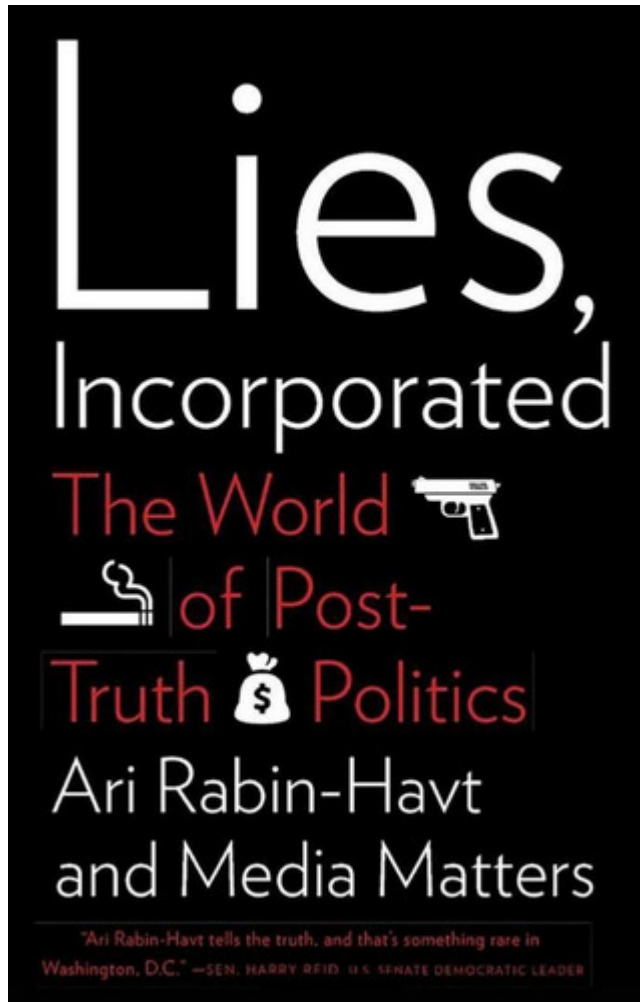


# 'Lies' is truth: Writers Explore American Politics

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*"Lies, Incorporated: The World of Post-Truth Politics"* by Ari Rabin-Havt and Media Matters for America. New York: Anchor Books (a division of Penguin Random House), 2016, 256 pages, \$15.00.



“Stories about political corruption in Washington often hinge on the simplest explanations and most easily available data: Lobbying disclosures, campaign contributions and independent expenditure reports,” Ari Rabin-Havt explains near the beginning of “Lies, Incorporated: The World of Post-Truth Politics,” the new treatise he wrote with some of his colleagues at Media Matters for America on the tendency of political parties to fabricate false narratives that better fit their particular socioeconomic agendas. “This creates a tendency to simplify problems in our political system, whittling down failures of our democracy to unchecked political contributions, bloated lobbying budgets, super PACs and other forms of direct and indirect graft.”

“Yet focusing solely on them obscures a fundamental truth: Our democracy has been hacked, manipulated by political practitioners who recognize that as long as there is no truth, there can be no progress,” he continues. “Lies have a uniquely corrosive impact on the creation of public policy. At the most basic level, they destroy public trust in our political systems, causing the American people to lose faith in their government. Lies also distract

from real debate, bogging down lawmakers and regulators, sometimes for years. Finally, lies create balkanization in our political culture, making ideological consensus impossible.”

Rabin-Havt is host of “The Agenda,” a daily radio show on SiriusXM. A senior fellow at Media Matters for America, his resume includes a stint as chief executive of American Independent, a nonprofit investigative reporting organization. He was educated at George Washington University, where he also served as an adjunct faculty member in the Graduate School of Political Management. Media Matters, which was founded in 2004 by journalist and political activist David Brock, is, according to its website, “dedicated to comprehensively monitoring, analyzing and correcting conservative misinformation in the U.S. media.”

The volume is extensively researched, with 38 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the preface and 10 chapters comprising the main text. I was amazed at the level of detail employed in describing the numerous examples and case studies presented in the book. The authors did their homework. Each chapter is devoted to meticulously dissecting a number of hot-button issues currently prevalent in our society, including climate change, health care, immigration, voter fraud, gun control and the national debt. The model for most of these discussions revolves around the tobacco industry's efforts to convince the public their product did not pose a health threat during the middle decades of the last century:

“The medical field – and the tobacco industry – had access to research concluding that the use of tobacco products posed a significant health risk,” Rabin-Havt notes in “The Birth of Lies, Incorporated: Tobacco,” the first chapter. John Hill, founder of the legendary public relations firm Hill & Knowlton, “believed the way to fight back was for the tobacco companies to join together, sponsor individual studies and issue new ‘pro-cigarette’ messaging using the word ‘research’ to highlight the scientific nature of their counterarguments.”

As anyone familiar with the story behind one of our nation's darker episodes knows, the tobacco industry employed the strategy to great success – at least for awhile – and consequently the approach became a template for discrediting scientific evidence on a number of other equally-divisive fronts. A key strength of “Lies, Incorporated” is how it separates fact from fiction on each of the aforementioned issues in a convincing and thorough manner – to the point where any intellectually honest person would have difficulty disagreeing with their conclusions.

One of the topics at the heart of our ongoing national dialog is addressed in “Growth in a Time of Lies: Debt,” the fourth chapter and one of my personal favorites. Here Rabin-Havt and his co-contributors tackle one of the more contentious issues being debated this election cycle: the spiraling national deficit. Just how concerned should we be about what has become more or less an accepted reality for the past three generations? Indeed, most of those under 50 have never lived in a nation that wasn't mired in an intricate patchwork of byzantine loans and financial smoke-and-mirrors ostensibly designed to keep the government – and our economy – functioning at more or less a rudimentary level.

“While deficit reduction is popular in theory, there is limited constituency for the reforms necessary to make it possible,” Rabin-Havt and his associates write. “These reforms include tax increases and discretionary budget cuts, including defense and entitlement adjustments. Deficit-reduction efforts of the past decade have focused on slaying the sacred cows of both political parties.”

At the heart of the thesis on which “Lies, Incorporated” rests is a seemingly undeniable truism: Whenever money is involved, truth is often relegated to a secondary status in the overall scheme of things. And whereas legitimate scientific inquiry has always been prefaced by the powerful idea that empirical evidence should drive the decision-making process, there are those who think reality should conform to their preconceived biases about how the world should work. Toward this end, Rabin-Havt and the folks at Media Matters are to be commended for trying to get the often-contemptuous discourse in this country based more on observation than inference – regardless of how much false narratives support corporate profits.

A wise man once said, “You shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.” If you believe in the inherent inerrancy of that statement, you'd probably enjoy “Lies, Incorporated.” I recommend this one highly.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*