



Today's marquee fibs almost always evolve the same way: A tree falls in the forest—say, the claim that Saddam Hussein has "weapons of mass destruction," or that Barack Obama has an infernal scheme to parade our nation's senior citizens before death panels. But then a network of media enablers helps it to make a sound—until enough people believe the untruth to make the lie an operative part of our political discourse.

For the past 15 years, I've spent much of my time deeply researching three historic periods—the birth of the modern conservative movement around the Barry Goldwater campaign, the Nixon era, and the Reagan years—that together have shaped the modern political lie. Here's how we got to where we are.

PROLOGUE

Just Making Stuff Up

WHEN AN EXPLOSION sunk the USS Maine off the coast of Havana on February 15, 1898, the New York Journal claimed two days later, "Maine Destroyed By Spanish: This Proved Absolutely By Discovery of the Torpedo Hole." There was no torpedo hole. The Journal had already claimed that a Spanish armored cruiser, "capable, naval men say, of demolishing the great part of New York in less than two hours," was on its way. "WAR! SURE!" a banner headline announced.

The instigator was a politically ambitious publisher, William Randolph Hearst. Kicked out of Harvard for partying, and eager to make a name for himself outside the shadow of his mining-magnate father, he made his way to New York, where he led the way in a sensationalist new style of newspaper publication—"yellow journalism."

In a fearsome rivalry with Joseph Pulitzer, he chose as his vehicle the sort of manly imperialism to which the Washington elites of the day were certainly sympathetic—although far too cautiously for Hearst's taste. "You furnish the pictures," he supposedly telegraphed a reporter, "and I'll furnish the war." The tail wagged the dog. At a time when the only way to communicate rapidly across long distances was via telegraph, it proved easy to make up physical facts.

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