

“Entertaining, illuminating, and — when you recognize yourself  
in the stories it tells — mortifying.” — *Wall Street Journal*

**MISTAKES**

**WERE**

**MADE**

(but not by *me*)

**WHY WE JUSTIFY FOOLISH BELIEFS,  
BAD DECISIONS, AND HURTFUL ACTS**

UPDATED, WITH A NEW CHAPTER:

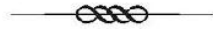
“DISSONANCE, DEMOCRACY, AND THE DEMAGOGUE”

Carol Tavris *and* Elliot Aronson



MISTAKES  
WERE MADE  
(BUT NOT BY *ME*)

*Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs,  
Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts*



Carol Tavris and  
Elliot Aronson



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# Contents

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[\*Title Page\*](#)

[\*Contents\*](#)

[\*Dedication\*](#)

[\*Copyright\*](#)

[\*Epigraph\*](#)

[\*Preface to the Revised Editions\*](#)

[\*Introduction\*](#)

[\*Cognitive Dissonance: The Engine of Self-Justification\*](#)

Pride and Prejudice . . . and Other Blind Spots

Memory, the Self-Justifying Historian

Good Intentions, Bad Science: *The Closed Loop of Clinical Judgment*

Law and Disorder

Love's Assassin: *Self-Justification in Marriage*

Wounds, Rifts, and Wars

Letting Go and Owning Up

Dissonance, Democracy, and the Demagogue

*Acknowledgments*

*Notes*

[Index](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Connect with HMH](#)

[Footnotes](#)

*For Leon Festinger, creator of the theory of cognitive  
dissonance, whose ingenuity inspired this book*

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We are all capable of believing things which we know to be untrue, and then, when we are finally proved wrong, impudently twisting the facts so as to show that we were right. Intellectually, it is possible to carry on this process for an indefinite time: the only check on it is that sooner or later a false belief bumps up against solid reality, usually on a battlefield.

—*George Orwell, 1946*

I see no reason why I should be consciously wrong today because I was unconsciously wrong yesterday.

—*Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson, 1948*

## PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITIONS

When the first edition of this book was published, in 2007, the country had already become polarized by the war in Iraq. Although Democrats and Republicans were initially equally likely to support George W. Bush's decision to invade, believing that Saddam Hussein was developing weapons of mass destruction, it soon became clear that he wasn't, and none were ever found. WMDs had vanished, but not political polarization, which we saw for ourselves in the reviewers of our book on Amazon.

Many conservatives were (and some still are) deeply annoyed by their perception that we were bashing Bush unfairly. One, who titled his review "Almost Great" and gave *Mistakes Were Made* three stars, said the book would have been truly great if we hadn't spent so much damned time trying to impose our political views on the reader and ignoring the mistakes and bad decisions that Democrats made. Any future edition, he advised, should delete all the "Bush lied" examples so it didn't seem like there was one on every fourth page.

Then we found a rebuttal review headed "Truly Great!" and giving the book five stars. This isn't a book about politics alone, this reviewer said, but about all aspects of human behavior. She found it extremely balanced, noting it discussed the mistakes, self-justifications, and delusions of members of both parties—for example, Lyndon Johnson's inability to get out of Vietnam was compared to Bush's determination to "stay the course" in Iraq.

For reasons that will be clear as you read this book, we enjoyed the second of these two Amazon reviews much more than the first. What a brilliant, astute reader, we thought, obviously so well informed! Whereas the first reviewer was completely muddled. Biased? *Us?* Don't be absurd! Why, we

bent over backward to be fair! A Bush-lied example on every fourth page and we didn't have a bad word for Democrats? Didn't this reader see our criticism of LBJ, whom we called a "master of self-justification"? How did he miss the Republicans we praised? And how did he misunderstand our main point, that George Bush was *not* intentionally lying to the American public about Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction but doing something all leaders and the rest of us do: lying to himself to justify a decision he had already made? And besides, we said, warning to our own defense, Bush was president when we began writing this book, and the costly war was dividing the nation. Its consequences are with us today, in the continuing warfare and chaos in the Middle East. What other example could have been as powerful or important an opening story?

Then, after reveling in our spasm of self-justification in response to the first reviewer, we had to face the dreaded question: "Wait a minute—are we right, or are we merely justifying ourselves? What if—horrors!—he has a point?" As human beings, the two of us are not immune to the pitfalls of thinking that we describe in our own book. No human being can live without biases, and we have ours. But we wrote this book with the goal of understanding them and shining a light on their operation in all corners of people's lives, including our own.

In the years since this book first appeared, readers, reviewers, neighbors, and friends have sent us comments, studies, and personal stories. Professionals in fields as different as dentistry, engineering, education, and nutrition urged us to add chapters on *their* experiences with recalcitrant colleagues who refused to pay attention to the data. Friends in England and Australia formed the Mistakes Were Made Irregulars to let us know who was using this iconic phrase in their countries.

We realized that a revision could easily be twice as long as the original without being twice as informative. For the second edition (2015), we updated the research and offered examples of attempts by organizations to correct mistakes and end harmful practices (for instance, in criminal prosecutions, methods of interrogation, hospital policies, and conflicts of

interest in science). Tragically, but not surprisingly for anyone who reads this book, there have not been nearly enough of those systematic corrections, and in some areas, deeply felt but incorrect beliefs, such as those held by people who oppose vaccinating their children, have become even more entrenched. We made a major change in chapter 8 by addressing an issue we had intentionally avoided the first time around: the problems that arise for people who cannot justify their mistakes, harmful actions, or bad decisions and who, as a result, suffer PTSD, guilt, remorse, and sleepless nights for far too long. There we offered research and insights that might help people find a path between mindless self-justification and merciless self-flagellation, a path worth struggling to discover.

And then, not long after the second edition appeared, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States, immediately exacerbating the political, ethnic, racial, and demographic tensions that had been growing for decades. Of course, political polarization between left and right, progressive and traditional, urban and rural, has existed throughout history and is still found all over the planet, with each side seeing the world through its preferred lens. But the Trump phenomenon is unique in American history, because Trump intentionally violated the rules, norms, protocols, and procedures of government—actions that his supporters applauded, his adversaries condemned, and many of his former opponents came to endorse. Whether or not Trump is in office as you read this, Americans will long be facing the moral, emotional, and political residue of his presidency.

It seems like eons since Republican nominee Bob Dole described Bill Clinton as “my opponent, not my enemy,” but in fact he made that civilized remark in 1996. How quaint it now seems in contrast to Donald Trump, who regards his opponents (or people who simply disagree with him) as treasonous, disloyal rats and foes. In our new concluding chapter, therefore, we closely examine the process by which Trump, his administration, and his supporters fostered that view, with devastating consequences for our democracy. We wrote this chapter in the hope that once we understand the

slow but pernicious shift in thinking from opponent to enemy, we can begin to find our way back.

—*Carol Tavis and Elliot Aronson, 2020*

## INTRODUCTION

### **Knives, Fools, Villains, and Hypocrites: *How Do They Live with Themselves?***

Mistakes were quite possibly made by the administrations in which I served.

*—Henry Kissinger, responding to charges that he committed war crimes in his role in the United States' actions in Vietnam, Cambodia, and South America in the 1970s*

If, in hindsight, we also discover that mistakes may have been made . . . I am deeply sorry.

*—Cardinal Edward Egan of New York (referring to the bishops who failed to deal with child molesters among the Catholic clergy)*

We know mistakes were made.

*—Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase (referring to enormous bonuses paid to the company's executives after the government bailout had kept them from bankruptcy)*

Mistakes were made in communicating to the public and customers about the ingredients in our French fries and hash browns.

*—McDonald’s (apologizing to vegetarians for failing to inform them that the “natural flavoring” in its potatoes contained beef byproducts)*

As fallible human beings, all of us share the impulse to justify ourselves and avoid taking responsibility for actions that turn out to be harmful, immoral, or stupid. Most of us will never be in a position to make decisions affecting the lives and deaths of millions of people, but whether the consequences of our mistakes are trivial or tragic, on a small scale or a national canvas, most of us find it difficult if not impossible to say “I was wrong; I made a terrible mistake.” The higher the stakes—emotional, financial, moral—the greater the difficulty.

It goes further than that. Most people, when directly confronted by evidence that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or plan of action but justify it even more tenaciously. Politicians, of course, offer the most visible and, often, most tragic examples of this practice. We began writing the first edition of this book during the presidency of George W. Bush, a man whose mental armor of self-justification could not be pierced by even the most irrefutable evidence. Bush was wrong in his claim that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction; he was wrong in stating that Saddam was linked with al-Qaeda; he was wrong in his prediction that Iraqis would be dancing joyfully in the streets at the arrival of American soldiers; he was wrong in his assurance that the conflict would be over quickly; he was wrong in his gross underestimate of the human and financial costs of the war; and he was most famously wrong in his speech six weeks after the invasion began when he announced (under a banner reading MISSION ACCOMPLISHED) that “major combat operations in Iraq have ended.”

Commentators from the right and left began calling on Bush to admit he had been mistaken, but Bush merely found new justifications for the war: he was getting rid of a “very bad guy,” fighting terrorists, promoting peace in the Middle East, bringing democracy to Iraq, increasing American security,

and finishing “the task [our troops] gave their lives for.” In the midterm elections of 2006, which most political observers regarded as a referendum on the war, the Republican Party lost both houses of Congress; a report issued shortly thereafter by sixteen American intelligence agencies announced that the occupation of Iraq had actually *increased* Islamic radicalism and the risk of terrorism. Yet Bush said to a delegation of conservative columnists, “I’ve never been more convinced that the decisions I made are the right decisions.”<sup>1</sup>

George Bush was not the first nor will he be the last politician to justify decisions that were based on incorrect premises or that had disastrous consequences. Lyndon Johnson would not heed the advisers who repeatedly told him the war in Vietnam was unwinnable, and he sacrificed his presidency because of his self-justifying certainty that all of Asia would “go Communist” if America withdrew. When politicians’ backs are against the wall, they may reluctantly acknowledge *error* but not their responsibility for it. The phrase “Mistakes were made” is such a glaring effort to absolve oneself of culpability that it has become a national joke—what the political journalist Bill Schneider called the “past exonerative” tense. “Oh, all right, mistakes were made, but not by me, by someone else, someone who shall remain nameless.”<sup>2</sup> When Henry Kissinger said that the administration in which he’d served may have made mistakes, he was sidestepping the fact that as national security adviser and secretary of state (simultaneously), he essentially *was* the administration. This self-justification allowed him to accept the Nobel Peace Prize with a straight face and a clear conscience.

We look at the behavior of politicians with amusement or alarm or horror, but what they do is no different in kind, though certainly in consequence, from what most of us have done at one time or another in our private lives. We stay in an unhappy relationship or one that is merely going nowhere because, after all, we invested so much time in making it work. We stay in a deadening job way too long because we look for all the reasons to justify staying and are unable to clearly assess the benefits of leaving. We buy a



lemon of a car because it looks gorgeous, spend thousands of dollars to keep the damn thing running, and then spend even more to justify that investment. We self-righteously create a rift with a friend or relative over some real or imagined slight yet see ourselves as the pursuers of peace—if only the other side would apologize and make amends.

Self-justification is not the same thing as lying or making excuses. Obviously, people will lie or invent fanciful stories to duck the fury of a lover, parent, or employer; to keep from being sued or sent to prison; to avoid losing face; to avoid losing a job; to stay in power. But there is a big difference between a guilty man telling the public something he knows is untrue (“I did not have sex with that woman”; “I am not a crook”) and that man persuading himself that he did a good thing. In the former situation, he is lying and knows he is lying to save his own skin. In the latter, he is lying to himself. That is why self-justification is more powerful and more dangerous than the explicit lie. It allows people to convince themselves that what they did was the best thing they could have done. In fact, come to think of it, it was the right thing. “There was nothing else I could have done.” “Actually, it was a brilliant solution to the problem.” “I was doing the best for the nation.” “Those bastards deserved what they got.” “I’m entitled.”

Self-justification minimizes our mistakes and bad decisions; it also explains why everyone can recognize a hypocrite in action except the hypocrite. It allows us to create a distinction between our moral lapses and someone else’s and blur the discrepancy between our actions and our moral convictions. As a character in Aldous Huxley’s novel *Point Counter Point* says, “I don’t believe there’s such a thing as a conscious hypocrite.” It seems unlikely that former Speaker of the House and Republican strategist Newt Gingrich said to himself, “My, what a hypocrite I am. There I was, all riled up about Bill Clinton’s sexual affair, while I was having an extramarital affair of my own right here in town.” Similarly, the prominent evangelist Ted Haggard seemed oblivious to the hypocrisy of publicly fulminating against homosexuality while enjoying his own sexual relationship with a male prostitute.

In the same way, we each draw our own moral lines and justify them. For example, have you ever done a little finessing of expenses on income taxes? That probably compensates for the legitimate expenses you forgot about, and besides, you'd be a fool not to, considering that everybody else does it. Did you fail to report some extra cash income? You're entitled, given all the money that the government wastes on pork-barrel projects and programs you detest. Have you been texting, writing personal e-mails, and shopping online at your office when you should have been tending to business? Those are perks of the job, and besides, it's your own form of protest against those stupid company rules, plus your boss doesn't appreciate all the extra work you do.

Gordon Marino, a professor of philosophy and ethics, was staying in a hotel when his pen slipped out of his jacket and left an ink spot on the silk bedspread. He decided he would tell the manager, but he was tired and did not want to pay for the damage. That evening he went out with some friends and asked their advice. "One of them told me to stop with the moral fanaticism," Marino said. "He argued, 'The management expects such accidents and builds their cost into the price of the rooms.' It did not take long to persuade me that there was no need to trouble the manager. I reasoned that if I had spilled this ink in a family-owned bed-and-breakfast, then I would have immediately reported the accident, but that this was a chain hotel, and yadda yadda yadda went the hoodwinking process. I did leave a note at the front desk about the spot when I checked out."<sup>3</sup>

But, you say, all those justifications are true! Hotel-room charges do include the costs of repairs caused by clumsy guests! The government does waste money! My company probably wouldn't mind if I spend a little time texting and I do get my work done (eventually)! Whether those claims are true or false is irrelevant. When we cross these lines, we are justifying behavior that we know is wrong precisely so that we can continue to see ourselves as honest people and not criminals or thieves. Whether the behavior in question is a small thing like spilling ink on a hotel bedspread or

a big thing like embezzlement, the mechanism of self-justification is the same.

Now, between the conscious lie to fool others and unconscious self-justification to fool ourselves, there's a fascinating gray area patrolled by an unreliable, self-serving historian—memory. Memories are often pruned and shaped with an ego-enhancing bias that blurs the edges of past events, softens culpability, and distorts what really happened. When researchers ask wives what percentage of the housework they do, they say, “Are you kidding? I do almost everything, at least 90 percent.” And when they ask husbands the same question, the men say, “I do a lot, actually, about 40 percent.” Although the specific numbers differ from couple to couple, the total always exceeds 100 percent by a large margin.<sup>4</sup> It's tempting to conclude that one spouse is lying, but it is more likely that each is remembering in a way that enhances his or her contribution.

Over time, as the self-serving distortions of memory kick in and we forget or misremember past events, we may come to believe our own lies, little by little. We know we did something wrong, but gradually we begin to think it wasn't all our fault, and after all, the situation was complex. We start underestimating our own responsibility, whittling away at it until it is a mere shadow of its former hulking self. Before long, we have persuaded ourselves to believe privately what we said publicly. John Dean, Richard Nixon's White House counsel, the man who blew the whistle on the conspiracy to cover up the illegal activities of the Watergate scandal, explained how this process works:

INTERVIEWER: You mean those who made up the stories were believing their own lies?

DEAN: That's right. If you said it often enough, it would become true. When the press learned of the wire taps on newsmen and White House staffers, for example, and flat denials failed, it was claimed that this was a national-security matter. I'm sure many people

believed that the taps *were* for national security; they weren't. That was concocted as a justification after the fact. But when they said it, you understand, they really *believed* it.<sup>5</sup>

Like Nixon, Lyndon Johnson was a master of self-justification. According to his biographer Robert Caro, when Johnson came to believe in something, he would believe in it “totally, with absolute conviction, regardless of previous beliefs, or of the facts in the matter.” George Reedy, one of Johnson’s aides, said that LBJ “had a remarkable capacity to convince himself that he held the principles he should hold at any given time, and there was something charming about the air of injured innocence with which he would treat anyone who brought forth evidence that he had held other views in the past. It was not an act . . . He had a fantastic capacity to persuade himself that the ‘truth’ which was convenient for the present was *the truth* and anything that conflicted with it was the prevarication of enemies. He literally willed what was in his mind to become reality.”<sup>6</sup> Although Johnson’s supporters found this to be a rather charming aspect of the man’s character, it might well have been one of the major reasons that Johnson could not extricate the country from the quagmire of Vietnam. A president who justifies his actions to the public might be induced to change them. A president who justifies his actions to himself, believing that he has *the truth*, is impervious to self-correction.

•••

The Dinka and Nuer tribes of the Sudan have a curious tradition. They extract the permanent front teeth of their children—as many as six bottom teeth and two top teeth—which produces a sunken chin, a collapsed lower lip, and speech impediments. This practice apparently began during a period when tetanus (lockjaw, which causes the jaws to clench together) was widespread. Villagers began pulling out their front teeth and those of their children to make it possible to drink liquids through the gap. The lockjaw