**Trump's big lie wouldn't have worked without his thousands of little lies**

*(CNN)*

"We won this election and we won it by a landslide," [said Donald Trump](https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2021-01-13/transcript-of-trumps-speech-at-rally-before-us-capitol-riot) at his "Save America" rally on January 6, [which](https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/12/politics/donald-trump-riot-impeachment/index.html) incited the assault on the Capitol. This is Trump's "Big Lie," a brazen falsehood with momentous consequences.

Trump's accusation that "radical left" Democrats stole his victory is certainly a whopper. But the focus on his Big Lie misses something fundamental about how propaganda works. A leader's Big Lie has no power and makes little sense on its own. It has traction only if the public has been fed many, many smaller lies. It relies on a larger network of falsehoods told by the leader and reinforced by his government officials and compliant media.

The Big Lie works because it is part of an established alternate belief system -- an edifice of lies, assembled piece by piece.

Trump, a leader of authoritarian intentions and tendencies, had disadvantages with respect to the foreign autocrats he so admires. He had no state media, like China's Xi Jinping. He could not rule by decree, like Hungary's Viktor Orbán. He had to govern and run for reelection in an open society with a relatively robust free press. Moreover, although he succeeded in making journalists into [hate objects](https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/11/opinions/journalists-attacked-during-protests-trump-authoritarianism-ben-ghiat/index.html) for many of his followers, he could not revoke or destroy the First Amendment.

So Trump took a different tack, unleashing a barrage of disinformation common in authoritarian states but without precedent in the history of the American presidency. He told more than 30,000 documented lies in public ([30,573 was The Washington Post's final tally](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/)), on Twitter, at rallies and in interviews. If taken as an average, it would come out to 21 lies per day over his four-year term.

Let's break down the smaller lies that prepared Trump's followers to accept the Big Lie. Each of these was highly damaging and consequential, and most were repeated endlessly by Trump and his co-conspirators in and out of government and replicated on social media, right-wing TV and radio, and more.

Some were not expressed directly by Trump but were connected to the personality cult he built -- though he did make overt claims that he would "save the United States," and pronounced that "I alone" can fix the country's ills (an allegedly fraudulent election system among them). Personality cults enable the spread of propaganda by allowing an autocrat to forge a special bond with followers, one based on faith and emotion rather than reason. Put simply, they believe -- and help amplify -- his lies because they believe in him.

Indeed, Trump's claims to a unique competence to rescue America [got an assist](https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/11/25/rick-perry-trump-gods-chosen-one/4295185002/) from a cadre of evangelical Christian preachers, authors, and government officials, former White House press secretary [Sarah Huckabee Sanders](https://www.politico.com/story/2019/01/30/sarah-huckabee-sanders-trump-god-1137547) among them, who contended that he ruled by divine benediction -- that God installed him to do His will. This encouraged followers to believe that Trump's destiny was to stay in office, priming them for the moment when Trump's asserted that a second term was rightfully his.

The events of January 6 cannot be understood without this structure of blind belief and all the small lies that supported it. For his supporters, Trump was a victim of the "Deep State" and other enemies -- his reelection had been foiled by their treachery, so it was up to his believers to fight back, to fix a rigged system with the only tool left: direct action.

The Big Lie seemed convincing because Trump had been lying about American elections for years. He started [drumming up](https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37673797) suspicion about rigged elections in 2016, when it looked like he would lose to Hillary Clinton. The ensuing four years of relentless propaganda aimed to erase all confidence in this fundamental institution of democracy.

It's not surprising that Trump's lying had a [dramatic](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/) uptick in 2020, when he was campaigning for reelection during a pandemic that he mismanaged with lethal results. He needed to discredit the main thing that threatened his power -- the vote. He worked overtime to throw doubt on every single aspect of voting. He told lies about dead people voting, about fraudulent mail-in ballots, about votes illegally counted, not counted at all, or invented.

In his [January 6 speech](https://wnyt.com/politics/transcript-of-trumps-speech-at-rally-before-us-capitol-riot/5977040/), he falsely accused Democrats of pulling "suitcases of ballots out from under a table." He lied that the news media had declared Biden the winner even though "they still don't have any idea what the votes are."

Focusing only on the Big Lie misses the big picture. It fails to convey the scope and gravity of the institutionalized lying that was Trump's biggest weapon. And it obscures the way minds were worn down, day after day, by one lie after another after another. Trump's aim in his ceaseless lying was to get his followers to trust him alone as the arbiter of reality and to distrust everyone and everything else -- especially the democratic system that stood in the way of his amassing sufficient power to become untouchable.

It's the authoritarian way. While Trump is now gone from the White House, millions of his supporters still cling fiercely to his lies. Each lie deserves our attention as we seek to combat the mass disinformation that threatens our democracy.