

Politicians and Magicians

BY PENN JILLETTE

I'VE BEEN A PROFESSIONAL MAGICIAN FOR 28 YEARS. I'm not the best magician in the world — I'm not even the best magician at the Rio Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, or the best magician in Penn & Teller. All of those "bests" are the same guy, my partner, Teller. He knows his magic — he can lie, cheat, and steal on stage better than anyone I've ever known or heard about.

People love to use lingo from disciplines they don't understand. It's fun for a non-musician to talk about a "groove" and for a guy who's never double-clutched to "put the hammer down" in his Hummer. Even the word "hummer" is more fun for the non-military and the non-hookers.

Tom is my editor for this little magazine. He doesn't know magic — he wouldn't know a double-lift from a classic palm, or a dove harness from a box jumper. But he's been bugging me for months to write about misdirection and how it applies to the political situation we have now.

The problem is, Tom doesn't appreciate the skill and nuance that goes into the magician's art. His idea of misdirection is pointing to the other side of the stage and then, when everyone looks, do something sneaky. In stage magic, that just plain doesn't work. Even at tennis matches and NASCAR crashes, not *everyone* looks at the same place at the same time. And if they did, or enough of them did, they'd know something fishy happened as soon as they looked back. They don't trust you because they know you're tricking them. George Washington said, in his own way, that you should treat government like stage magicians.

OK, there is one place in the show where I point to Teller on the other side of the stage while I do something sneaky with my left hand. The pointing is a little private joke for Teller and me; I don't have to point; it's not part of the move. The audience doesn't have to look where I point for the trick to work. I've practiced the sneaky thing that I do over and over, and no one's going to catch it. Teller's checked it. You can stare right at my hands and you still won't see me do it. And the sneaky thing that I do doesn't pay off until the very end of the whole bit. No one remembers the pointing by then, and there's nothing they can

figure that I could've done that would've helped the trick. But I do point. I guess I point for Tom.

Teller talks about misdirection being "the little lie that hides the bigger lie." (He doesn't talk on stage, but as everyone always suspected, he's the brains of the outfit.) It's the little trick that rules out the big trick. If you hook some hard-to-see wires to an underweight, underage, underpaid, under-credited, over-worked, over-it, teenage runaway in a glittery thong and a Stevie Nicks blouse that hides the harness, and you lift her up, everyone figures, "Oh, there must be some strings that we can't see because of the shimmery Mylar with the fan blowing it around to confuse the eye, along with all the Bunny Ranch-style lighting." But if you then bring out a hoop and pass it around her while she yawns and some white-boy-ripoff-Motown-music blares, the audience thinks, "Well, there can't be any strings. It must be real magic, like that guy, David Blaine — you remember, from back when there were slow news days before September 11."

The misdirection works by having gaps in the hoop so you can pass it over the teenager without hitting the strings. You make the audience think the hoop's solid beforehand by pretending to rotate it in your hand while you really just move your hands in a way that looks like the hoop is rotating, but really you're always hiding the gap. That's just a little sleight-of-hand trick. And people start thinking crazy thoughts like "Well, there couldn't be wire, could there? It is magic!"

Or else they start thinking wild "Mr. Physics" stuff. My buddy, Amazing Randi, went to a magic show with Marvin Minsky one time, and Minsky wondered if the hanging woman trick was done using liquid nitrogen to cool everything down to super-conductivity. Super conductivity — or a gap in the goddamn hoop? Did Occam live in vain?

OK, so I hope I've explained the idea of misdirection to you political people. But I have no idea how to tie it in with what the government's doing. It's hard to concentrate on writing this while Rumsfeld's on TV explaining why it's OK to show the bloody, shaved corpses of Saddam's pig Latin-named sons. But it must tie in somehow, don't you think?



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