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The Color of Mendacity

American journalists have long believed that Government intrusion is the greatest threat to the profession. That may still be true when it comes to issues of independence and secrecy. But when it comes to the credibility of the American press, the most damaging recent wounds have been self-inflicted. The mimicking of salacious British tabloids, the raucous Washington talk shows, the fad for intellectually flaccid "civic journalism" have all done damage. The latest damage comes from the political columnist Joe Klein's revelation that he lied, often and energetically, about being the anonymous author of "Primary Colors" and that his top editor at Newsweek cooperated in the subterfuge.

Their behavior violates the fundamental contract between journalists, serious publications and their readers. If journalists lie or publications knowingly publish deceptively incomplete stories, then readers who become aware of the deception will ever after ask the most damaging of all questions: How do I know you are telling me the whole truth as best you can determine it *this time*?

Mr. Klein and Newsweek's editor, Maynard Parker, have invited the public and their professional colleagues to view their actions as an amusing game with soap-opera overtones. Of course, what they do with their individual credibility is up to

them and the owners of their magazine. But it is shameless of Mr. Klein to excuse his falsehoods as similar to the protection of confidential sources. "There are times," he said, "when I've had to lie to protect a source, and I put that in this category."

In fact, principled journalists do not lie to protect sources. They rely on constitutional and statutory guarantees of journalistic privilege. Scores of reporters have maintained silence, sometimes to the point of going to jail, and their publications have spent a lot of money to defend the confidentiality guarantee in court. But they do so without lying. To try to stretch a noble doctrine to excuse a duplicitous book-selling scheme is irresponsible and disreputable.

One of the artistic models for Mr. Klein's book was "All the King's Men," by Robert Penn Warren. But we have to wonder if Mr. Klein really mastered the theme of the book, which has to do with the insidious nature of corruption. Mr. Klein wants his colleagues to view his actions as a diverting and highly profitable whimsy. But he has held a prominent role in his generation of political journalists. For that reason, people interested in preserving the core values of serious journalism have to view his actions and words as corrupt and — if they become an example to others — corrupting.