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Memorandum

To: Trialists

Fr: Curtis Meinert

Re: On bullshit

Everyday barnyard vernacular includes *bullshit*, *horseshit*, and *chickenshit*. The three terms have different connotations. *Chickenshit* typically refers to some worthless or contemptible act. “That was a chickenshit thing he did”. *Horseshit* refers to bunk or nonsense. That was a horseshit trick they pulled on Rudy. *Bullshit* is stupid or untrue talk. The election was stolen.

**On Bullshit** is the title of a book (67 pages, pocket size) published by Princeton University, 2005, written by Harry G. Frankfurt, Princeton professor of philosophy, emeritus (first published as an essay, 1986, in the *Raritan Quarterly Review Journal*). The book was on the New York Times Best Seller list for 27 weeks.

Frankfurt asserts that bullshit is speech intended to persuade without regard for truth. The liar cares about the truth and attempts to hide it; the bullshitter doesn't care if what he or she says is true or false, but cares only whether the listener is persuaded.

Frankfurt, in his opening paragraph, writes:

*One of the most salient features of our culture is that there is so much bullshit. Everyone knows this. Each of us contributes his share. But we tend to take the situation for granted. Most people are rather confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it. So the phenomenon has not aroused much deliberate concern, or attracted much sustained inquiry. In consequence, we have no clear understanding of what bullshit is, why there is so much of it, or what functions it serves. And we lack a conscientiously developed appreciation of what it means to us. In other words, we have no theory.*

As to most people being *confident of their ability to recognize bullshit and to avoid being taken in by it*. Tell that to the Capitol police on duty January 6<sup>th</sup> this year.

There is an art form to bullshitting. You need a gallery. It can be one-on-one, but usually the bullshitter needs an audience. Back in Sleepy Eye usually as gathered in beer halls or at social events. Typically then the domain of men.

The goal of the bullshitter is getting people to believe the story pitched. An accomplished bullshitter will sprinkle the pitch with verifiable facts to make it believable.

I have done my share of bullshitting. I learned the art form from people I grew up with, including my father.

I have tried to immunize my daughters against bullshit by stringing them lines. The trouble is once they bought in, my moral upbringing kicked in and caused me to tell them the line was bullshit. I hate it when I have a good story going and somebody asks “really?”. I am done then. I have to tell them it is BS.

In my teaching days I would occasionally sprinkle in bullshit stories. I was OK until I saw students taking notes. That is when I had to tell them “don’t take that down. It’s bullshit”.

As near as I can figure, bullshitters have to be amoral.

I avoided the moral dilemma of bullshitting by telling shaggy dog stories – defined by Wikipedia *as long-winded anecdote characterized by extensive narration of typically irrelevant incidents and terminated by an anticlimax.*

I honed my story telling skills during my dorm years. My prize winner was a story that went on for a half hour with a dorm buddy. It involved a troublesome dog in which I occasionally kicked my dorm buddy’s leg to emphasize “get away” commands. Alas, eventually he realized there was no end to the story and limped off in disgust.

Lying and bullshitting are forms of bluffing, but the cover for a bullshitter is better than for a liar. The trouble with lying, it is concerned with denying an actual event. If the cover is blown the liar has a credibility problem.

The bullshitter is not troubled or encumbered by facts. This perhaps is why Frankfurt recites a story from Eric Ambler’s novel “Dirty Story” in which a father advises his son “Never tell a lie when you can bullshit your way through”.