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Non-denial denial

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Non-denial denial is a phrase that became popular in the wake of the [Watergate scandal](#), referring to an [equivocal](#) denial, particularly one made by an official to the press. [London's *The Sunday Times*](#) has defined it as "an on-the-record statement, usually made by a politician, repudiating a journalist's story, but in such a way as to leave open the possibility that it is actually true."^[1]

A "non-denial denial" is a statement that seems direct, clearcut and unambiguous at first hearing, but when carefully parsed is revealed not to be a denial at all, and is thus not untruthful. It is a case in which words that are literally true are used to convey a false impression; analysis of whether or when such behavior constitutes lying is a long-standing issue in [ethics](#).

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Cited in Pinholster v. Ayers, No. 03-99003 archived on December 11, 2009

Origin and history of the phrase

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The Washington Post editor [Benjamin C. Bradlee](#) "is credited with coining the phrase *non-denial denial* to characterise the evasive [Oval Office](#) answers to questions," according to a 1991 retrospective on Bradlee's career in *The Times*.^[2]

The phrase was popularized during the [Watergate scandal](#) by [Bob Woodward](#) and [Carl Bernstein](#) in their 1974 book *All the President's Men* in reference to evasive statements by then-[Attorney General John N. Mitchell](#):

A [CRP](#) official had told the reporters that Mitchell helped draft many of the non-denial denials which were being issued in response to their stories.^[3]

[William Goldman](#)'s screenplay for the [1976 film adaptation](#) put it into the mouth of [Ben Bradlee](#) and used it to good dramatic purpose. The Bradlee character looks at some White House releases and comments "—all non-denial denials—we're dirty guys and they doubt we were ever virgins but they don't say the story is inaccurate." Later, Bradlee worries about the accuracy of a story and asks the reporters "That didn't sound to me like a non-denial denial; could you have been wrong?" Bradlee

drafts a response, not a retraction, which he calls "*My non-denial denial*," before changing his mind and says "Fuck it, we'll stand by the boys."^[4]

A 1976 newspaper article called an [Olympic](#) official's statement on [blood-doping](#) "a non-denial denial, a Watergate denial;"^[5]; an assessment of [Ron Ziegler](#)'s career dubbed him "the nondenial denier" and placed his tenure as [White House Press Secretary](#) in "the Alice-in-Wonderland era that spawned the form of official evasion that came to be known as the nondenial denial."^[6]

Types

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- Characterizing a statement as "ridiculous" or "absurd" without saying specifically that it is not true;
- Saying "We are not going to dignify [that] with a response;"
- Impugning the general reliability of a source (e.g. Mitchell, "The so-called sources of the Washington Post are a fountain of misinformation") without addressing the *particular* fact alleged by the source.
- Denying a more specific version of events than that which was actually alleged. For example, for an allegation of corruption, saying "I have never received any *money* from anyone in the party" when an exchange of *goods* took place; or denying that a company is about to lay off 500 people, and then going on to lay off 600.

Examples

[[edit](#)]

Bill Clinton

[[edit](#)]

BBC Magazine^[7] cites a 1998 statement by U.S. President [Bill Clinton](#), made during the [Monica Lewinsky](#) scandal, as a "non-denial denial."

Clinton was accused of having sex with Lewinsky, a White House intern. In response, Clinton issued an apparently unambiguous denial, stating, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman." It later transpired that the accuracy of the statement hinged on Clinton's use of a narrow legal definition of "sexual relations" which had been agreed upon for the purposes of the case – that "sexual relations" is defined in many legal codes as a person making physical contact with another person's [sex organs](#). By this limited definition, the act of [fellatio](#) did not qualify as Clinton "sexual relations" with Lewinsky because he had not touched her genitals. Many viewers, however, unaware of Clinton's narrow definition of sexual relations, took his denial to mean that no sex act, of any kind whatsoever, took place.

Tony Blair

[[edit](#)]

Another example, characterized by the [BBC](#) as a "non-denial denial," was provided by [Tony Blair](#), who was interviewed in 1997, just before the [general election](#), by the British newspaper *Evening Standard*. The question was: "Will [Labour](#) introduce tuition fees for higher education?" Blair's answer was: "Labour has no plans to introduce tuition fees for higher education." *No plans* does not mean *no tuition fees*. The Labour Party used the same ambiguous wording in its manifesto for the [election in 2001](#), writing: "We will not introduce 'top-up' fees and have legislated to prevent them." The increase of university fees up to £3000 was voted for before the [next election in 2005](#) but implemented in 2006. Therefore the British government explained that the manifesto in 2001 was only valid for the period up to the election in 2005.^[7]

Mark McGwire

[[edit](#)]

Investigative journalists [Lance Williams](#) and [Mark Fainaru-Wada](#) used the phrase in their 2006 book *Game of Shadows* to characterize an ambiguous response by retired [Major League Baseball](#) star [Mark McGwire](#) during a [Congressional](#) hearing on [steroids in baseball](#):

McGwire turned evasive. He had nothing to say about anything. Pressed about

“

whether he had used performance-enhancing drugs, he responded over and over again, "I'm not here to talk about the past." The refrain became so pathetic and predictable that McGwire was mocked by some of the politicians, while the audience chuckled each time he uttered his non-denial denial.^[8]

”

See also

[edit]

- Denial
- Non-apology apology
- Sound bite
- Shermanesque statement



Journalism portal

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External links

[edit]

- Definition of lie. American Heritage Dictionary, 4th edition, 2000

Categories: Public relations techniques

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