

A Hoax Provokes Folks: Why Lie?



Back to the beginning of the country, the American media has run stories that were widely regarded as true, but were eventually revealed as hoaxes. A few of them were innocuous. Some were not. Were the following hoaxes really printed?

1. **March 12, 1782:** Benjamin Franklin, in France during the Revolutionary War, to make mischief for the British, composes and prints up a page of an imaginary newspaper, the *Boston Independent Chronicle*, which carries a letter purporting to be from a Captain Gerrish of the New England Militia, accompanying and describing in detail a package of more than a thousand dried scalps captured from Seneca Indians who had been paid by the British to terrorize men, women, and children among the American colonists, and ultimately meant to be shipped to England for the gratified amusement of King George. In a letter to a friend, Franklin says of his story: "The *Form* may perhaps not be genuine, but the *Substance* is truth."

Yes No

2. **August 21, 1835:** The *New York Sun* begins a series of articles, continuing for ten days, purporting to describe the discoveries of Royal Astronomer Sir John Herschel, through a giant telescope, of sentient beings living on the Moon. The ladies of Springfield, Massachusetts subscribe to a fund "to send missionaries to the benighted luminary."

Yes No

3. **April 13, 1844:** The *New York Sun* publishes Edgar Allan Poe's (spurious) account of a crossing of the Atlantic Ocean by balloon. The demand for the paper is so great that crowds block the *Sun* office throughout the day waiting to buy copies, and Poe is unable to get a copy for himself.

Yes No

4. **September 1844:** During James Polk's Presidential run, the Whig-run *Ithaca Chronicle* publishes a letter, supposedly quoting directly from a Baron von Roorback's *Tour through the Western and Southern States in 1836*, about the author's encountering a slave caravan in the South. It includes a description of about forty slaves among the manacled who had been

purchased from Polk, whose initials had been branded into their shoulders. Thurlow Weed eagerly copies it into his Albany *Evening Journal* and it becomes a major issue in the campaign, until it is shown to be a hoax. The passage was created by interpolating material into a passage from an actual book, *Excursion Through the Slave States*, written by George W. Featherstonhaugh and published in London in 1844.

Yes No

5. **October 4, 1862:** Samuel Clemens, then a writer for the Virginia City, Nevada *Territorial Enterprise*, publishes an article claiming that a sitting petrified man had been discovered in the mountains, of which "every limb and feature" was still perfect, except turned into stone. The story is widely believed and reprinted in other papers around the country.

Yes No

6. **March 2, 1864:** Union cavalry officer Colonel Ulric Dahlgren leads a raid against Richmond, whose main purpose is to free prisoners of war being held by the Confederacy at Belle Isle. Dahlgren is shot and killed during the unsuccessful raid. Southern soldiers find documents on his body that outline other objectives of the raid. One of the documents orders Dahlgren to burn and destroy the city and to kill Confederate President Jefferson Davis and his cabinet, actions clearly outside the conventional rules of war. The *Richmond Examiner* publishes the text of the documents and says in an enraged editorial that the North has decided to begin conducting the war "under the Black Flag."

Yes No

7. **May 18, 1864:** The *New York World* and the *New York Journal of Commerce* print what they believe to be an Associated Press story about a proclamation from President Lincoln ordering a huge new conscription of soldiers, causing speculators to sell stocks and buy gold furiously on fears that the Civil War will continue far longer than was expected. It is quickly revealed that Joseph Howard, the city editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, forged the story so that he could buy gold before the story came out and sell it at the end of the day.

Yes No

8. **April 1, 1874:** *New York Herald* reporter Joseph Clarke and editor Thomas Connery panic New Yorkers by publishing an article they have concocted about a mass escape of animals from the Central Park Zoo, who have taken to roaming the city looking for prey of the species

homo sapien, causing "terrible scenes of mutilation." Cartoonist Thomas Nast later references the hoax in a political cartoon he draws for *Harper's Magazine*, in which he depicts the Democrats as an ass and the Republicans as an elephant, creating the parties' political icons.

Yes No

9. **August 16, 1924:** During Prohibition, *New York Herald* reporter Sanford Jarrell publishes a story about a "mysterious joy-boat of 15,000 tons which was lying about 15 miles off Fire Island, aboard which Long Island millionaires and pretty playthings of the idle rich were drinking intoxicating beverages and disporting themselves with the utmost abandon by night." The day after the article is published, the Coast Guard is assigned to hunt down the vessel. When the *Herald* editors discover the story is a hoax, they fire Jarrell.

Yes No

10. **November 20, 1967:** U.S. News and World Report claims that it can confirm the authenticity of *The Report from Iron Mountain*, a book that had recently been published by Dial Press. The book purported to be the text of a leaked report issued by a secret study group commissioned by the Johnson Administration, which concluded that a lasting peace, if it were ever achieved, would not be in the best economic interests of society, and that the government therefore ought to foster a war mentality among the people by scaring them with exaggerated threats of terrestrial and even extraterrestrial foes and impending environmental disasters. It also recommended that the government heighten inter-ethnic tensions within the country and even re-institute slavery. The book in fact is certainly a hoax, authored by writer Leonard Lewis, who, when finally confessing in 1972 that he wrote it, defends it as a useful stimulus to public debate on the Vietnam War and claims that the 1971 leaked publication of the "Pentagon Papers," which were real, has demonstrated that the government is capable of actions that are as outrageous as anything in his "satire."

Yes No