

**Real World Graduation: Question 42: Political Promises**

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Question 42

During the Presidential election campaign of 1988, George H. W. Bush stated, "Read my lips, no new taxes". He was subsequently elected as the 41st President of the U. S. What did this statement mean regarding his intended tax policy as President?

- a) He would never raise income taxes if elected President.
- b) Since he said "read my lips", the statement was directed only at deaf people; so he meant that he would not raise income taxes on deaf people.
- c) "No new taxes" means he would not create any new category of taxes.
- d) Every tax must be paid every year, therefore all taxes are "new"; thus this statement means he was going to eliminate all federal taxes.
- e) A combination of a) and c).

### Answer to Question 42

This is a trick question. None of the answers are correct, because Presidents do not raise taxes. Only Congress has the power to raise a tax.

If we consider the answers as under our Constitutional system, in which all tax bills are passed first in Congress, all of the answers are still wrong. Answers a) and c) are still wrong because there is no way to prevent Congress from raising income taxes if it decides to do so.

Soon after George H. W. Bush was elected president, Congress passed a bill raising the income tax rates, and he promptly signed it into law in 1990. The bill also included new taxes imposed on boats, cars, alcohol, and tobacco. The fact that the government does not create new taxes does not mean it won't raise the rates on existing categories of taxation. Answer b) is wrong because neither the increased tax rates or new taxes contained an exception for deaf people. Therefore, even if we assign the least-constraining meaning to this statement ("I will veto any attempt by Congress to create any new categories of taxation on deaf people, or raise tax rates on deaf people"), we find that one of two things is true: a) either he was lying when he said it; or b) when push came to shove, he gave in to the demands of his politician friends, and threw the taxpayers overboard.

George H. W. Bush has not, to public knowledge, admitted to lying in this particular instance. But in general, even when you parse a politician's statement down to the etymology from the Middle French, you will find they are usually still lying. Why do politicians lie? For the same reason a cat licks his butt: no one expects any different behavior, and there is no penalty for it.

Answer d) is wrong because it is a rhetorical trick commonly used by politicians and bureaucrats of all types. If you chose d), you are exactly the kind of dummy the politicians and bureaucrats appreciate most.

You should keep in mind that most powerful people, whether in governments or in large corporations, are lying most of the time about most things. You should not rely on any of them for assurances of security or policy.