

This paper identifies and attempts to explain a puzzling pattern in the ancient sources on the second century b.c.e. In numerous cases, Roman ambassadors and other officials assigned overseas are represented as making reports to the Senate that subsequent experience demonstrated to have exaggerated the threatening intentions and capabilities of the foreign states on which they were reporting. Examples include, among others, the letters sent to the Senate in early 200, which warned that Philip V would soon follow the example of Pyrrhus if he was not checked (Livy 31.3.4-6), the report from ambassadors to Carthage in 175, revealing evidence of a sinister alliance between Carthage and the Macedonian king Perseus (Livy 41.22.1-2), and the consecutive reports of three embassies to Carthage from 153-151, reporting the construction of a fleet (Livy *per.* 47-48). That these reports were sincerely believed by their authors can in some cases be ruled out and in other cases seems highly improbable. What is puzzling is that the most exaggerated assessments of foreign threats should come not from Rome, where imaginations unchecked by facts could presumably run wild, but from the very individuals who had first hand access to information about the situation on the ground in foreign states.

The typical response of modern scholars to such reports has been either to accept them as sincere expressions of the ambassadors' perceptions or to reject them as "annalistic fictions" imagined by the historians of the first century b.c.e. and later. While the former alternative strains credulity, the latter falls into a type of error systematically perpetrated by the more enthusiastic proponents of *Quellenforschung*. According to this school of thought, the demonstrable falsehood of a statement made by a figure in a historical narrative is grounds for rejecting the historicity of the speech, and often by extension the events and characters who make up the framing narrative. However, since lying and deceit have been the tools of politics in every age, it is a better methodology to judge the historicity of recorded statements not by their demonstrable truth or falsehood or based on whether they could have been sincerely believed by those depicted as making them. Rather, such statements should be evaluated on the basis of whether they would have been both plausible to their intended audience and in the interests of those making them.

While modern scholars have occasionally identified individual reports of ambassadors as Roman "propaganda" (in the sense of "disinformation"), no one has treated the pattern systematically nor has anyone considered its implications for our understanding of the role of Roman ambassadors in the context of domestic politics. Analysis of the overall pattern suggests that *legati* in the second century often served as a source of authoritative eyewitness evidence in support of domestic arguments for war. This theory is supported by the fact that these exaggerated reports sometimes showed up in the wording of official arguments made to the centuriate assemblies charged with ratifying wars in this period (see Livy 31.7 and 42.30.10-11). Furthermore, even in cases where the transmission of alarmist reports outside of the Senate is not attested, the responsibility of the Senate for appointing the ambassadors suggests that propagandistic reports were not intended primarily for consumption inside the Senate. This thesis suggests that Rome's ruling elite was well aware of the importance of the strategic manipulation of information in the task of achieving domestic consensus around foreign wars. A cursory review of recent U.S. history will reveal that not much has changed in this regard.