

Bush's counteroffensive on Iraqi WMD

A new wave of lies and intimidation

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The Bush administration has launched a “campaign-style” counteroffensive against renewed charges that it deliberately deceived the American people and the world about an alleged threat from Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” to justify a war of aggression that had long been in the making.

That official Washington is seized by this debate—more than three and a half years after US ground troops invaded Iraq—is a measure of the desperate crisis that the Iraqi quagmire has created for America’s ruling elite.

The immediate catalyst for the renewed controversy is the indictment of I. Lewis “Scooter” Libby, the vice-presidential chief of staff for lying to a federal grand jury in the CIA leak case. What has become obvious in this case is that Libby’s perjury was aimed at covering up the far more momentous lies told by Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney in dragooning the country into war. But it is hardly just the Libby case that is involved here.

We are passing through yet another period in American history confirming Abraham Lincoln’s wise old adage: “You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can not fool all of the people all of the time.”

The torrent of lies and propaganda that poured out of the White House has come back to haunt Washington. This is a product, in the first instance, of the pressure of the brutal colonial war in Iraq, with its more than 2,050 dead US soldiers and over 100,000 Iraqi civilian dead. It is also, however, influenced by the deteriorating social conditions for millions and the immense gulf between wealth and poverty at home, exposed so nakedly in the Hurricane Katrina disaster and its aftermath. As result, the truth has begun seeping in.

A series of three extraordinary opinion polls released within the last week have all shown the same thing: at least 6 out of every 10 Americans believe Bush is a liar—and better than 7 out of 10 think that Cheney is one—and that the overriding reason for this belief is the war in Iraq.

One of the polls, conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* and NBC News, found that 57 percent of Americans—nearly 6 in 10—believe that the Bush administration lied to the American public about the reasons for war.

It is doubtful that “Honest Abe” himself could have ever imagined anything so massive and blatant as the Bush administration’s campaign to fool the American people into accepting an illegal war, much less the abject failure of any section of the political establishment to refute it.

This latter aspect of the extraordinary weapons of mass destruction propaganda campaign serves as the principal weapon in the White House counteroffensive. Bush and his aides are pointing an accusatory finger at the Democratic politicians demanding, "How can you condemn the lies now, when you went along with them then?"

In the opening salvo of the administration's counteroffensive, Bush's national security advisor Stephen Hadley was brought before the White House press corps last Thursday to insist that the belief that Iraq posed a grave threat "was shared by Republicans and Democrats alike."

"Some of the critics today believed themselves in 2002 that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction," Hadley declared, "they stated that belief, and they voted to authorize the use of force in Iraq because they believed Saddam Hussein posed a dangerous threat to the American people."

"The intelligence was clear in terms of weapons of mass destruction," Hadley added, declaring that there was "a very strong case" for concluding Iraq posed a serious threat.

It was only under reporters' questioning that the national security advisor grudgingly acknowledged that this "clear" intelligence was all wrong and the "strong case" utterly disproved by the failure to find any Iraqi WMD in the wake of the US invasion.

Hadley's remarks were followed on Friday by Bush's own Veterans Day speech. Standing next to a Humvee and in front of a banner reading "Strategy for Victory," Bush delivered the speech to a safe audience of uniformed soldiers and veterans groups assembled inside a warehouse in Pennsylvania.

"When I made the decision to remove Saddam Hussein from power, the Congress approved it with strong bipartisan support," Bush declared. He added, "While it's perfectly legitimate to criticize my decision or the conduct of the war, it is deeply irresponsible to rewrite the history of how the war began. Some Democrats and anti-war critics are now claiming we manipulated intelligence and misled the American people about why we went to war. These critics are fully aware that a bipartisan Senate investigation found no evidence of political pressure to change the intelligence community's judgments related to Iraq's weapons programs."

The administration appears to have a default position: when previous lies unravel, prop them up with more lies. Neither the Senate investigation into Iraqi WMD intelligence nor the commission appointed by Bush and headed by Judge Laurence Silberman dealt with how the administration "manipulated intelligence and misled the American people," but only the nature of the intelligence itself.

On this score, the Silberman panel concluded that the intelligence was "dead wrong" and constituted one of the "most damaging intelligence failures in American history." A failure, it should be added, for which no one was ever held accountable, precisely because false intelligence is what the administration wanted.

It is technically true that the administration did not attempt to "change the intelligence community's judgments"; the CIA could think whatever it liked so long as it served up purported evidence to substantiate the administration's charges against Iraq. It wasn't the CIA's or even Congress's judgment that the White House was interested in manipulating, but

rather than that of the American people.

Fear-mongering over 9/11

How was this done? Bush talks about rewriting history, but what was the history of how the war was prepared and sold? It is above all one of grotesque falsifications and fear-mongering centered on exploiting fears surrounding the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington to promote a war against Iraq, which had nothing to do with these attacks.

The right-wing cabal in the leadership of the White House and the Pentagon welcomed September 11 as a pretext for launching a war of aggression against Iraq that they had been advocating since the end of the first Persian Gulf War under Bush senior. While both they and the Clinton administration had invoked Saddam Hussein's non-existent weapons as justification for military attacks and sanctions against Iraq, now they made the case that a US war to change Iraq's government was unpostponable.

This involved a barrage of propaganda falsely linking the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq to the Al Qaeda Islamist terrorist network and the September 11 attacks themselves.

This was combined with equally false claims that Iraq was on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons, which it could then hand off to its supposed "ally," Osama bin Laden.

Both assertions were made again and again in the run-up to the war, long after US and other intelligence agencies had informed the administration that these claims were demonstratively false.

On the alleged Al Qaeda ties, Bush and Cheney repeatedly invoked "intelligence" concerning a supposed April 2001 meeting between Mohammed Atta, identified by Washington as the lead 9/11 hijacker, and an Iraqi intelligence agent in Prague.

This charge was repeated months after the Czech government as well as the CIA and the FBI offered firm conclusions that no such meeting ever took place.

Just this week, *Newsweek* cited a January 2003 CIA report sent to Congress and obtained by the magazine showing that "even before Colin Powell and George W. Bush asserted that Saddam had provided WMD training to Qaeda terrorists, the agency had reported that the captured Qaeda leader used as the source for the allegation lacked firsthand knowledge of the matter." *Newsweek* added, "A newly declassified Pentagon intel report, circulated more than a year before the US invasion, said it was 'likely' the source made up the story to please his interrogators."

The report also made the rather obvious point that the Iraqi regime was "intensely secular" and therefore an enemy of the Islamist Al Qaeda movement, making any such collaboration highly improbable to say the least.

This was a key part of the "clear intelligence" and "very strong case" cited by Hadley.

On the nuclear weapons threat, there was the report of an Iraqi purchase of aluminum tubes combined with the claim that Iraqi officials had attempted to buy enriched uranium in Niger. Both claims were also debunked by US intelligence, yet the administration continued to make them, knowing they were false.

It was the Niger story, included in Bush's 2003 State of the Union speech, that led to a public denunciation of the administration's lies by former ambassador Joseph Wilson, who had been sent to the African country months earlier and reported back that the claim was bogus. This in turn provoked the retaliation campaign by the administration—exposing Wilson's wife as a covert CIA agent—which has landed Libby in the defendant's dock on felony perjury charges.

No one is revising any history; it is rather a matter of these old lies disintegrating in the consciousness of millions of people.

The administration's response to this turn of events is to launch a frenzied attack on its Democratic Party critics.

"More than 100 Democrats in the House and the Senate, who had access to the same intelligence, voted to support removing Saddam Hussein from power," Bush declared in his speech. He went on to quote his 2004 Democratic presidential challenger John Kerry as declaring in 2002 of Saddam Hussein that "a deadly arsenal of weapons of mass destruction in his hands is a threat and a grave threat to our country."

So what is the point? The Democratic Party was complicit. It knew Bush was lying and went along with the administration's war policy. This was based on the cowardly—and woefully misguided—political calculations that it could best fight the 2002 midterm election by bowing to the Republican right on the war and campaigning solely on economic issues. It was also, however, a matter of the war against Iraq being a consensus policy within the American financial elite that controls both parties.

The decision was taken that US could use its overwhelming military force to conquer Iraq, which possesses the second-largest oil reserves in the world, and thereby advance its geo-strategic position both in the Middle East and internationally. Unable to publicly defend a war waged for such naked class interests, the political establishment as a whole embraced the fraud of Iraqi WMD.

No prominent Democrat had any interest in challenging or probing Bush's case for war. As the *Washington Post* reported Sunday, "Congress was entitled to view the 92-page National Intelligence Estimate about Iraq [which included a finding that the Iraqi regime would neither use weapons of mass destruction or hand them over to terrorists, unless backed into a corner by US military aggression] before the October 2002 vote. But...no more than six senators and a handful of House members went beyond the five-page executive summary."

Without even a cursory look at the evidence, the Democratic leadership in Congress ceded its constitutional power to declare war, supporting a resolution granting Bush blank-check authority to launch unprovoked aggression against Iraq whenever he saw fit. Even today, the Democrats' belated criticisms of the administration's lies before the war ring hollow as the party leadership continues to support the war, in some cases even having called for more troops to be deployed in Iraq.

But the administration's problem is not with the Democrats. Rather, it is with the American people, which has a well-earned distrust of both major parties. It is not a matter of what the Democratic politicians knew and were told, but what the masses of working people in the US knew and were told. Both parties deliberately deceived them in order to get the war the ruling elite wanted.

In the face of this mass opposition, Bush delivered a speech that consisted not of arguments meant to convince anyone, but rather of rhetoric intended to intimidate all those questioning the administration's policy.

"These baseless attacks send the wrong signal to our troops and to an enemy that is questioning America's will," he declared. "As our troops fight a ruthless enemy determined to destroy our way of life, they deserve to know that our elected leaders who voted to send them to war continue to stand behind them. Our troops deserve to know this support will remain firm when the going gets tough. And our troops deserve to know that whatever our differences in Washington, our will is strong, our nation is united, and we will settle for nothing less than victory."

Bush's remarks—a large portion of them having been lifted verbatim from the speech he delivered last month to the right-wing think tank, the American Enterprise Institute—were also intended for his extreme right-wing base.

Recycled here is the old "stab-in-the-back" theme, a staple of extreme right-wing politics going back to Adolf Hitler. The conception is that the troops are prepared to fight to victory, but they are being held back and betrayed by craven politicians at home. The logic of such denunciations is that all opposition to the war should be suppressed and those who persist arrested.

Bush's speech is symptomatic of the deep crisis that the policy in Iraq has created for the whole political class. The mutual recriminations now roiling Washington are a result of that policy having engendered a catastrophe. Through invading and occupying Iraq, killing, imprisoning and torturing countless thousands in the process, Washington has managed to create something that never existed before—a mass base of support for actions carried out in the name of Al Qaeda.

The Bush administration and its Democratic accomplices have emerged as the recruiting sergeants for Islamist terrorism and are ultimately responsible for whatever horrors it unleashes.

From the start, what drove the war in Iraq were the predatory geopolitical interests of America's ruling oligarchy. This ruling circle was convinced that these aims could be achieved exclusively by means of military force, and as a result rejected all negotiation and compromise. Now the brutal methods it favored have blown up in its face.

The awakening of millions of people in the US to the lies they were told to justify the war in Iraq is creating the political conditions for the emergence of a genuine mass base for a movement against this war and the capitalist system that gave rise to it.

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