

## Lies and the lying liars who tell them

Jim Fetzer

And if I add, "most of whom are Republican", would anyone be able to prove that I am wrong? Anyone who reads Al Franken's book of the same title would realize that the evidence is there and the evidence is strong. This administration appears to be the most indifferent to truth in the history of our nation. Since we act on our beliefs and when they are false they provide us with inaccurate guidance, it should come as no surprise--in retrospect--that we are in such a mess abroad and at home.

Those who have followed the rationale advanced by the administration for going to war in Iraq know all too well the lies that have been told connecting Saddam Hussein to Osama bin Laden, tying Iraq to terrorism, and repeatedly characterizing an attack on Iraq as a response to 9/11. As Dan Milbank and Claudia Deane have reported in *The Washington Post* (6 September 2003), 69% of Americans still think that Saddam was involved in the attacks on the World Trade Center.

Dick Cheney has said that he is not surprised most Americans drawn that connection. And neither are independent experts. Andrew Kohut, for example, who leads the nonpartisan Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, has observed that precisely such a link was fostered during the nine months leading up to the attack because that very notion was reinforced by these repeated hints and suggestions to precisely such an effect, even though it was not true.

Indeed, Bush himself has recently declared that there is no evidence linking Saddam to 9/11, even while he continues to insist that the war on Iraq is central to the war on terrorism. Our own CIA had dismissed the alleged connections to 9/11 before the war was launched and reported that Iraq had not been engaged in acts of terrorism for at least the past ten years--since the end of the first Gulf War. And, as we are all aware, no weapons of mass destruction have been found.

Yet in his speeches leading up to the war, Bush repeatedly associated Iraq with 9/11. "If the world fails to confront the threat posed by the Iraqi regime", he said in March, "refusing to use force, even as a last resort, free nations would assume immense and unacceptable risks. The attacks of September the 11th, 2001, showed what the enemies of American did with four airplanes. We will not wait to see what terrorists or terrorist states could do with weapons of mass destruction."

In declaring the end of major combat ("Mission Accomplished") after landing aboard the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, he declared, "The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror that began on September the 11th, 2001--and still goes on. That terrible morning, 19 evil men--the shock troops of a hateful ideology--gave American and the civilized world a glimpse of their ambitions." He didn't mention that fifteen of them were Saudi Arabians and that none of them were Iraqis. (Or remind us that he had gone AWOL during his own service in the Air National Guard!)

And this theme was repeated by many other officials associated with the government,

such as Richard Pearle, who has been the head of a civilian board that provides advice to the Pentagon and who has argued that the evidence for Iraqi involvement in 9/11 was "overwhelming". Yet the only known connection--an alleged meeting between an Iraqi intelligence officer and Mohammed Atta in Prague--has been repudiated by the government of Czechoslovakia. Atta even seems to have been in the US at the time.

In a brilliant column, Maureen Dowd (*The New York Times*, 14 September 2003) has observed that things are so bad for Dubya, he is back in a dead heat with Al Gore; and that things are so bad for Al Gore, he is back in a dead heat with Dubya. (Just in case anyone has forgotten, Gore beat Bush by 500,000 votes in the popular election, which the Supreme Court gave to the Republicans by denying the people of Florida the right to have their votes counted. Apparently, one man/one vote only means the right to cast a vote, not to have it actually counted!)

Dowd reports that, while the Bush administration presumed it could use its high tech weapons ("shock and awe") to impose its will upon primitive cultures, we are in the process of "spending hundreds of billions to subdue two backward countries without subduing them". And, after celebrating a premature declaration of victory, we are in the process of discovering that low tech weapons--including homemade bombs and suicide bombers, not to mention guerrilla tactics--can unravel the best laid plans of the mightiest power in the world. Afghanistan is reverting to tribal rule, while Iraq festers in chaos.

George Lakoff, a masterful contributor to the fields of cognitive science and linguistics, has likewise recognized that deceit and deception have been the hallmarks of the Bush administration. On *AlterNet* (15 September 2003), Lakoff observes that, while most of our troops have been left with the impression that, "We went to war in Iraq, first, to defend our country against terrorists, [and] second, to liberate that country--selflessly, at great sacrifice, not out of self-interest", the evidence indicates that quite the opposite is in fact the case.

As most of the world perceives, but our government has denied, American interests appear to have driven the attack on Iraq: "control of the Iraqi economy by American corporations, the political shaping of Iraq to suit US economic and strategic interests, military bases to enhance US power in the Middle East, reconstruction profits to US corporations, control over the future of the second largest oil supply in the world, and refining and marketing profits for US and British oil companies." And it may be worth asking ourselves, *Should we be surprised?*

As the celebrated linguist, Noam Chomsky (*Toronto Star*, 7 September 2003), has also observed, the National Security Strategy of the United States, which declares that the US alone has the right to carry out "preventive war" (not pre-emptive by striking first when we incur an imminent threat, but by using military force to eradicate a perceived threat, whether real or imagined) is "the supreme crime" condemned by the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals. (Perhaps it is no coincidence that the US has opposed the creation of The International Criminal Court!)

"There is no telling how many wars it will take to secure freedom in the homeland", says the President of the United States. He doesn't mention that national security is the best issue--perhaps the *only* issue--that might allow the Republican Party to retain its power or that his "carefully staged aircraft-carrier extravaganza", as *The Wall Street Journal* discerned, "marks the beginning of his 2004 reelection campaign", one the White House hopes "will be built as much as possible around national security themes". Except that Iraq has spun out of control and this strategy may backfire.

Indeed, as Max Cleland, a celebrated Vietnam veteran (*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 18 September 2003), has remarked, we appear to be repeating all of the same mistakes that cost us so dearly in Vietnam. We were supposed to be going to war against a brutal dictator supported by one-party rule. Neither LBJ nor Dubya gave any indication during their campaigns that they intended to go to war. Their advisors, however, had already cooked up plans to go to war and were only waiting for an excuse.

Faulty intelligence was fed to the Congress, which led to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and to the authorization for the use of "necessary force" to repel the enemy, using as its rationale an event that never occurred. The war was fought with great success in initial stages but then became bogged down in a quagmire when the enemy began to resort to guerrilla tactics against a better armed but morale-depleted American force. Terrorist attacks, selective assassinations, increased casualties and growing anti-US sentiment led to increasing disenchantment with the war at home. There was no plan for extricating us from combat. There was no "exit" strategy.

All the while, an overly confident President assured the American people that they were winning, while a cocky Secretary of Defense deplored opponents of the war, even to the extent of promising that the troops would be coming home soon and, in the case of Iraq, suggesting that those who oppose the war are strengthening our enemies abroad--as if criticism of poor policies that consume limited resources and lead to pointless deaths of young men and women were somehow "unpatriotic"!

As Christian Parenti on the ground with US troops in Iraq has observed (*The Nation*, 6 October 2003), the high tech weaponry that bedazzled the Pentagon is useless when the combat on the ground pits conventional forces against unconventional opponents. They use black humor to cope with suppressed feelings of rage and abandonment. "These guys are proud to be soldiers and don't want to come across as whiners," she reports, "but they are furious about what they have been through."

"They hate having their lives disrupted and put at risk. They hate the military for its stupidity, its feckless lieutenants and blowhard brass living comfortably in Saddam's palaces. They hate Iraqis--or, as they say, "hajis"--for trying to kill them. They hate the country for its dust, heat and sewage-clogged streets. They hate having killed people. Some even hate the politics of the war." Which should come as no surprise, since the politics of the war appears to have been to benefit powerful corporations and advance the interests of the Republican Party.

In one of the most fascinating columns to emerge from this entire hapless mess, Olivia Ward (*Toronto Star*, 8 September 2003), has astutely defined the rhetorical strategy of this administration in using the media to promote and foster an apocalyptic vision of the future as a clever campaign to mislead and manipulate the masses. Bush has progressed from a linguistic bumbler who once told reporters that "anybody who doesn't think I am smart enough to handle the job is misunderestimating" to a master of the media through the use of dominating phrasing and a grasp of the principle that "language is power".

Dr. Renana Brooks, the psychologist who heads the Sommet Institute for the Study of Power and Persuasion, has observed that the kind of power language Bush employs is "all about fear and control. 'He has gone farther than any other president in creating a crisis scenario that makes people feel helpless'. Using language as a propaganda tool, Bush has turned fear into propaganda. It's a winning formula that allowed him to mesmerize the nation after Sept. 11, making himself politically invulnerable, while turning his political

enemies into enemies of the state."

In this, he appears to be following a time-tested formula. Some of its key elements are empty language (using phrases and sentences virtually devoid of cognitive content, but which are emotionally loaded), personalizing the situation (with emphasis upon himself as the actor who can control the course of events), and learned helplessness (conveying the impression that the masses are impotent and unable to cope with a situation), which requires him to assume personal responsibility for the survival of the state.

And there is a tradition of this kind. "Another weapon I discovered early was the power of the printed word to sway souls to me. The newspaper was soon my gun, my flag--a thing with a soul that could mirror my own." (Adolph Hitler) "Think of the press as a great keyboard on which the government can play." (Joseph Goebbels) "Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger". (Hermann Goering)

Indeed, the spirit of the present administration has been captured perfectly by one of America's most honored military leaders: "Our government has kept us in a perpetual state of fear--kept us in a continuous stampede of patriotic fervor--with the cry of grave national emergency. There always has been some terrible evil at home or some monstrous foreign power that was going to gobble us up if we did not blindly rally behind it. . . ." (Douglas MacArthur)

In this case, the events of 9/11 were real enough but, without justification, 9/11 was used to fashion and shape public attitudes toward a war with Iraq the administration had intended to launch at its first opportunity, even though it had to manufacture false reasons when the real reasons would not do. The deceit and deception--the lies upon lies--were propounded and defended even when they had long since lost all semblance of plausibility. Thus has this administration acted in the spirit of fascism to bring us a war we did not want and did not need, whose consequences remain only dimly foreseen, but whose undertaking leaves this nation far less secure than it was before.

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Jim Fetzer, a professor of philosophy at UMD, recommends Al Franken, *LIES AND THE LYING LIARS WHO TELL THEM* (2003), which features photographs of Ann Coulter, George W. Bush, Bill O'Reilly, and Dick Cheney on its cover beneath the word "LIES".