

Get Me Rewrite!

By Paul Krugman

Right now America is going through an Orwellian moment. On both the foreign policy and the fiscal fronts, the Bush administration is trying to rewrite history, to explain away its current embarrassments.

Let's start with the case of the missing w.m.d. Do you remember when the c.i.a. was reviled by hawks because its analysts were reluctant to present a sufficiently alarming picture of the Iraqi threat? Your memories are no longer operative. On or about last Saturday, history was revised: see, it's the c.i.a.'s fault that the threat was overstated. Given its warnings, the administration had no choice but to invade.

A tip from Joshua Marshall, of www.talkingpointsmemo.com, led me to a stark reminder of how different the story line used to be. Last year Laurie Mylroie published a book titled "Bush vs. the Beltway: How the c.i.a. and the State Department Tried to Stop the War on Terror." Ms. Mylroie's book came with an encomium from Richard Perle; she's known to be close to Paul Wolfowitz and to Dick Cheney's chief of staff. According to the jacket copy, "Mylroie describes how the c.i.a. and the State Department have systematically discredited critical intelligence about Saddam's regime, including indisputable evidence of its possession of weapons of mass destruction."

Currently serving intelligence officials may deny that they faced any pressure—after what happened to Valerie Plame, what would you do in their place?—but former officials tell a different story. The latest revelation is from Britain. Brian Jones, who was the Ministry of Defense's top w.m.d. analyst when Tony Blair assembled his case for war, says that the crucial dossier used to make that case didn't reflect the views of the professionals: "The expert intelligence experts of the d.i.s. [Defense Intelligence Staff] were overruled." All the experts agreed that the dossier's claims should have been "carefully caveated"; they weren't.

And don't forget the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans, created specifically to offer a more alarming picture of the Iraq threat than the intelligence professionals were willing to provide.

Can all these awkward facts be whited out of the historical record? Probably. Almost surely, President Bush's handpicked "independent" commission won't investigate the Office of Special Plans. Like Lord Hutton in Britain—who chose to disregard Mr. Jones's testimony—it will brush aside evidence that intelligence professionals were pressured. It will focus only on intelligence mistakes, not on the fact that the experts, while wrong, weren't nearly wrong enough to satisfy their political masters. (Among those mentioned as possible members of the commission is James Woolsey, who wrote one of the blurbs for Ms. Mylroie's book.)

And if top political figures have their way, there will be further rewriting to come. You may remember that Saddam gave in to u.n. demands that he allow inspectors to roam Iraq, looking for banned weapons. But your memories may soon be invalid. Recently Mr. Bush said that war had been justified because Saddam "did not let us in." And this claim was repeated by Senator Pat Roberts, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee: "Why on earth didn't [Saddam] let the inspectors in and avoid the war?"

Now let's turn to the administration's other big embarrassment, the budget deficit.

The fiscal 2005 budget report admits that this year's expected \$521 billion deficit belies the rosy forecasts of 2001. But the report offers an explanation: stuff happens. "Today's budget deficits are the unavoidable result of the revenue erosion from the stock market collapse that began in early 2000, an economy recovering from recession and a nation confronting serious security threats." Sure, the administration was wrong—but so was everyone.

The trouble is that accepting that excuse requires forgetting a lot of recent history. By February 2002, when the administration released its fiscal 2003 budget, all of the bad news—the bursting of the bubble, the recession, and, yes, 9/11—had already happened. Yet that budget projected only a \$14 billion deficit this year, and a return to surpluses next year. Why did that forecast turn out so wrong? Because administration officials fudged the facts, as usual.

I'd like to think that the administration's crass efforts to rewrite history will backfire, that the media and the informed public won't let officials get away with this. Have we finally had enough?