

Credibility Gap

The Bush administration has perfected the art of being dishonest without lying. Unfortunately, a compliant press (and public) have allowed them to get away with it.

By Matthew Yglesias

Writing in the March 29 issue of *Newsweek*, Jonathan Alter described Democrats as “over the top” in their constant references to the president’s dishonesty. “Because Bush & Co. were as shocked as anyone at the absence of WMD” in Iraq, he says, “that’s more in the category of grotesque hype than outright lie.” For a *real* “example of dishonesty and, yes, corruption at high levels” we need to look to Medicare, where Chief Actuary Rick Foster calculated that the bill would cost over \$150 billion more than the administration was claiming and was kept silent only through the threat that he’d be fired if he released his work to the Congress.

In a sense, Alter’s right. The administration learned the true cost of the bill, realized that the truth was politically inconvenient, and decided to cover it up and continue to feed the public and the Congress information it knew to be false. That is a lie.

On Iraq, the administration took a different tack. On the subject of links between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, for example, the White House operated largely by omission. True, but incomplete, statements were made, calculated to instill a belief in the public that the Iraqi government was a sponsor of the Ansar al-Islam terrorist organization when there was not, in fact, any evidence that this was true. This was a clever strategy, in its way. By why is leadership by deception any less worthy of condemnation for the fact that the deception was cleverly performed?

The problem is a prosecutorial mindset in the media, overly concerned with whether or not the narrow criteria for a lie have been met. When Clinton was being literally charged with the crime of perjury, it was all well and good to say that the phrase “there is no sexual relationship” was, though obviously calculated to mislead, strictly true. In the case of Bush, however, perjury—whether or not we have the material for, as Alter puts it, a “real scandal”—is simply not the issue. Rather, the issue is why the Bush administration is systematically unwilling to clearly convey to the American public an accurate picture of its agenda. The answer is that Bush’s dishonesty is not a personal foible or character flaw but rather a response to the fact that his agenda, when stated truthfully, is very unpopular.

As Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson demonstrate in their paper “Abandoning The Middle Class: The Revealing Case of the Bush Tax Cut,” public opinion at the time of the 2001 tax cut debate consistently indicated a preference for debt reduction, increased federal spending, or both over a large income tax cut. Voters were hostile not only to the magnitude of the tax cut, but also to its structure. As Hacker and Pierson write:

Whenever asked in clear terms, a large majority of respondents said that they wanted the tax cut to focus more of its benefits on middle-income and lower-income Americans. Indeed, when asked their leading concerns about the tax code, voters, perhaps surprisingly, point to neither the tax code’s staggering complexity nor to the tax burdens they face themselves. Rather, by consistently large margins the main worry of Americans has been that “the rich pay too little in taxes”—hardly the sentiment reflected in the Bush tax cut.

Bush’s response to this was not, of course, to curtail the size of the tax cut or to direct its benefits toward the bottom of the spectrum but rather to dissemble about what he was doing. The budget he put forth was filled with inane accounting gimmicks designed

to hide both the true cost of his proposal and to overstate the government's ability to pay, a tactic we've seen repeated frequently in the years since.

Another favorite was to use the word "average" in contexts where there was a large difference between the *mean* tax cut (big) and the *median* tax cut (small), taking advantage of plain language's ambiguity to make people think typical families would obtain a significant share of the money when they in fact would not. Little—perhaps even none—of this was lying in a strict sense, so the media simply reported the dispute between Bush and the Democrats about the true nature of his proposal as another partisan "he said, she said" spat.

As a result, millions of Americans never learned what exactly their president was doing. Early 2001 polls registered approval of the Bush tax package by an average margin of 56-33 among the very same public that, when asked about specifics, disapproved of almost all the package's major features.

Widespread voter ignorance has long been understood to be a feature of American life, but conventional wisdom has had it that compensatory mechanisms and the effects of aggregation lead to roughly the same outcomes we would have if we had a better-informed electorate. Hacker and Pierson's work suggests otherwise, that the single most important element of the Bush domestic agenda passed largely because voters failed to understand what was happening. Certainly, the GOP faced no voter backlash at the polls in 2002. When, after the election, Paul O'Neill questioned the wisdom of another round of budget-busting tax cuts for the rich, Dick Cheney told him: "We won the midterms. This is our due." And, sure enough, another round passed through similar methods.

A new paper by Steven Kull, Clay Ramsey, and Evan Lewis shows a similar dynamic at work in foreign policy. The authors examined the pervasiveness of three pieces of misinformation in the American public: that the United States has discovered WMD in Iraq, that evidence has been found showing that the Iraqi regime worked closely with al-Qaeda, and that world opinion favored America's decision to go to war. Support for the war was found to be highly correlated with the possession of false beliefs on these three matters—86 percent of those who believed all three supported the war, as did 78 percent of those who believed two, and 53 percent of those who believed just one. Among people who knew the truth on all three scores, just 23 percent supported the war. One key finding was that misinformation about the state of world opinion was the single strongest predictor of support for the war. In light of the fact that as late as February 2003 polls showed strong support for the proposition that war should be undertaken only with U.N. approval, it is tempting to speculate that the administration's campaign to portray U.N. opposition as solely a matter of French intransigence rather than as reflecting almost universal hostility to the undertaking was a crucial factor in building public support for the invasion.

It's easy at this point to wax indignant about the administration's dishonesty on these and other fronts. Fundamentally, however, it's hard to blame them for trying their best to secure support for an agenda in which they believe. The deeper question is why this strategy of deception works so well; for, if it works for Bush, surely his successors in either party will be tempted to do the same thing.

The problem is that much of the White House press corps seems to have abdicated its responsibility of telling the public what's going on. Instead, reporters prefer to simply copy down the latest administration statement and perhaps pair it with a quotation indicating that Democrats disagree with the Republicans. Actually inquiring what the truth is seems to no longer be part of the job. Berkeley economist Brad DeLong recounted last Thursday on his weblog a conversation with *New York Times* reporter Elisabeth Bumiller regarding a story she wrote about a palpably false assertion from Cheney. DeLong's "assertion that whether [Richard] Clarke was out-of-the-loop or was the loop itself is a matter of fact, and that a reporter has a duty to ascertain and to report to her readers

such matters of fact, did not meet with a response.”

On March 22, *The Baltimore Sun* reported Bumiller’s response to criticism that the press had been too easy on the president before the war:

I think we were very deferential because . . . it’s live, it’s very intense, it’s frightening to stand up there. Think about it, you’re standing up on prime-time live TV asking the president of the United States a question when the country’s about to go to war. There was a very serious, somber tone that evening, and no one wanted to get into an argument with the president at this very serious time.

These are serious times indeed, which is precisely why reporters *must* be willing to get into arguments with the president when he tries to mislead people. Unfortunately, as widespread public misperceptions attest, Bumiller’s attitude seems to be widely shared among her colleagues. If they don’t get over their fear of telling the truth soon, we’ll all be in for a very frightening future.

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