BALLOT BOX

Trust, Don't Verify

Bush's incredible definition of credibility.

By William Saletan

> *One thing is for certain, though, about me, and the world has learned this: When I say something, I mean it. And the credibility of the* United States *is incredibly important for keeping world peace and freedom.*

That's the summation President Bush delivered as he wrapped up his press conference Tuesday night. It's the message he emphasized throughout: *Our commitment. Our pledge. Our word. My conviction.* Given the stakes in Iraq and the war against terrorism, it would be petty to poke fun at Bush for calling credibility "incredibly important." His routine misuse of the word "incredible," while illiterate, is harmless. His misunderstanding of the word "credible," however, isn't harmless. It's catastrophic.

To Bush, credibility means that you keep saying today what you said yesterday, and that you do today what you promised yesterday. "A free Iraq will confirm to a watching world that America's word, once given, can be relied upon," he argued Tuesday night. When the situation is clear and requires pure courage, this steadfastness is Bush's most useful trait. But when the situation is unclear, Bush's notion of credibility turns out to be dangerously unhinged. The only words and deeds that have to match are his. No correspondence to reality is required. Bush can say today what he said yesterday, and do today what he promised yesterday, even if nothing he believes about the rest of the world is true.

Outside Bush's head, his statements keep crashing into reality. Tuesday night, ABC's Terry Moran reminded him, "Mr. President, before the war, you and members of your administration made several claims about Iraq: that U.S. troops would be greeted as liberators with sweets and flowers; that Iraqi oil revenue would pay for most of the reconstruction; and that Iraq not only had weapons of mass destruction but, as Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld said, 'We know where they are.' How do you explain to Americans how you got that so wrong?"

Inside Bush's head, however, all is peaceful. "The oil revenues, they're bigger than we thought they would be," Bush boasted to Moran, evidently unaware that this heightened the mystery of why the revenues weren't covering the reconstruction. As to the WMD, Bush said the chief U.S. weapons inspector in Iraq had confirmed that Iraq was "hiding things. A country that hides something is a country that is afraid of getting caught." See the logic? A country that hides something must be afraid of getting caught, and a country afraid of getting caught must be hiding something. Each statement validates the other, sparing Bush the need to find the WMD.

Bush does occasionally cite other people's statements to support his credibility. Saddam Hussein "was a threat to the region. He was a threat to the United States," Bush told Moran. "That's . . . the assessment that Congress made from the intelligence. That's the exact same assessment that the United Nations Security Council made with the intelligence." Actually, the Security Council didn't say Iraq was a threat to the United States, but never mind. The more fundamental problem with Bush's appeal to prewar assessments by Congress and the Security Council is that these assessments weren't reality. They were attempts—not even independent attempts, since the administration heavily lobbied both bodies—to approximate reality. When they turned out not to match reality, members of Congress (including Republicans) and the Security Council (including U.S. allies) repudiated them.

Not Bush. He's impervious to evidence. "I look forward to hearing the truth as to exactly where [the WMD] are," he told *Time*'s John Dickerson at the press conference. A year after Saddam's ouster and four months after Saddam's capture, Bush continued to insist that "people who should know about weapons" are still "worried about getting killed, and therefore they're not going to talk. . . . We'll find out the truth about the weapons at some point." You can agree or disagree with this theory. But you can't falsify it.

Bush doesn't see the problem. He's too preoccupied with self-consistency to notice whether he's consistent with anything else. "I thought it was important for the United Nations Security Council that when it says something, it means something," he told Moran. "The United Nations passed a Security Council resolution unanimously that said, 'Disarm or face serious consequences.' And [Saddam] refused to disarm." Never mind that the Security Council didn't see what Bush saw in terms of Iraqi disarmament and didn't mean what Bush meant in terms of serious consequences. Never mind that this difference in perception was so vast that Bush ducked a second Security Council vote on a use-of-force resolution. What's important is that when the Security Council says something, it must mean something, even if the something the Council said isn't the something Bush meant.

As Tuesday night's questions turned to the 9/11 investigation, Bush retreated again to the incontrovertible truths in his head. "There was nobody in our government, at least, and I don't think [in] the prior government, that could envision flying airplanes into buildings on such a massive scale," he told NBC's David Gregory. Never mind that somebody who had worked in Bush's administration and the prior administration— namely, counterterrorism coordinator Richard Clarke—had raised precisely this concern about the 1996 Olympics. Never mind that the president's daily intelligence brief on Aug. 6, 2001—titled "Bin Ladin Determined To Strike in U.S."—had warned Bush, "FBI information since [1998] indicates patterns of suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for hijackings or other types of attacks, including recent surveillance of federal buildings in New York." These were external phenomena and therefore irrelevant. What mattered was that Bush couldn't "envision" the scenario.

Three times, Bush repeated the answer he gave to Edwin Chen of the *Los Angeles Times*: "Had there been a threat that required action by anybody in the government, I would have dealt with it." Outside Bush's head, the statement was patently false: The 9/11 threat required action, and Bush failed to deal with it. But inside Bush's head, the statement was tautological: If there were a threat that required action, Bush would have dealt with it; Bush didn't deal with it; therefore, there was no threat that required action. The third time Bush repeated this answer—in response to a question about whether he owed an "apology to the American people for failing them prior to 9/11"—he added, "The person responsible for the attacks was Osama Bin Laden." This is how Bush's mind works: Only a bad person can bear responsibility for a bad thing. I am a good person. Therefore, I bear no responsibility.

On 9/11, as on WMD, Bush mistakes affirmation for verification, description for reality, and words for deeds. "I was dealing with terrorism a lot as the president when George Tenet came in to brief me," he told Chen. "I wanted Tenet in the Oval Office all the time. And we had briefings about terrorist threats." This was Bush's notion of dealing with terrorism: being briefed by the CIA director. The world that mattered was the Oval Office.

Did the briefings lead to action outside the office? No, because there was no "threat that required action." What about the Aug. 6 brief? "I asked for the briefing," Bush told Chen. "And that's what triggered the [Aug. 6] report." Tuesday's *Washington Post* tells a different story: "According to senior intelligence officials familiar with the document, work on it began at the end of July, at the initiative of the CIA analyst [who] wanted to raise the issue" of Bin Laden's threat to the U.S. mainland. But Bush can't believe that

someone outside his head was trying to tell him something. He's certain he "triggered" the brief. That's why, as he explained to Chen, he "didn't think there was anything new" in it: He assumed it was his idea. He doesn't understand that the point of a briefing is to be told something you hadn't already thought of.

This explains the most amazing part of Bush's answer to Chen: "What was interesting in [the brief] was that there was a report that the FBI was conducting field investigations. And that was good news, that they were doing their job." Here is a president who reads that the FBI has found "patterns of suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for hijacking" and concludes that all is well because the FBI is "investigating" such activity. Why does Bush make this mistake? Because he doesn't understand that the "suspicious activity" is the subject of the brief. He thinks the "investigations" are the subject. He thinks he's being told about his version of reality—the world inside his administration—not the world of plots beyond his awareness.

How does Bush square his obtuseness to the threat from Bin Laden with his obtuseness to the absence of a threat from Saddam? "After 9/11, the world changed for me," he explained Tuesday night. That's Bush in a nutshell: The world changed *for him*. Out went the assumption of safety, and in came the assumption of peril. In the real world, Bin Laden was still a religious fanatic with global reach, and Saddam was still a secular tyrant boxed in by sanctions and no-fly zones. But in Bush's head, everything changed.

To many Americans, the gap between Bush's statements about the months before 9/11, on the one hand, and the emerging evidence about those months, on the other, raises doubts about the credibility of their government. To other nations, the gap between Bush's statements about Iraqi weapons, on the one hand, and the emerging evidence about those weapons, on the other, has become the central reason to distrust the United States in other matters of enormous consequence, such as North Korea's nuclear program.

To all of this, however, Bush is blind. He doesn't measure his version of the world against anybody else's. He measures his version against itself. He says the same thing today that he said yesterday. That's why, when he was asked Tuesday whether he felt any responsibility for failing to stop the 9/11 plot, he kept shrugging that "the country"—not the president—wasn't on the lookout. It's also why, when he was asked to name his biggest mistake since 9/11, he insisted, "Even knowing what I know today about the stockpiles of weapons [not found in Iraq], I still would've called upon the world to deal with Saddam Hussein." Bush believes now what he believed then. Incredible, but true.

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