

OP-ED COLUMNIST

## To Tell the Truth

By Paul Krugman

Some news organizations, including The New York Times, are currently engaged in self-criticism over the run-up to the Iraq war. They are asking, as they should, why poorly documented claims of a dire threat received prominent, uncritical coverage, while contrary evidence was either ignored or played down.

But it's not just Iraq, and it's not just The Times. Many journalists seem to be having regrets about the broader context in which Iraq coverage was embedded: a climate in which the press wasn't willing to report negative information about George Bush.

People who get their news by skimming the front page, or by watching TV, must be feeling confused by the sudden change in Mr. Bush's character. For more than two years after 9/11, he was a straight shooter, all moral clarity and righteousness.

But now those people hear about a president who won't tell a straight story about why he took us to war in Iraq or how that war is going, who can't admit to and learn from mistakes, and who won't hold himself or anyone else accountable. What happened?

The answer, of course, is that the straight shooter never existed. He was a fictitious character that the press, for various reasons, presented as reality.

The truth is that the character flaws that currently have even conservative pundits fuming have been visible all along. Mr. Bush's problems with the truth have long been apparent to anyone willing to check his budget arithmetic. His inability to admit mistakes has also been obvious for a long time. I first wrote about Mr. Bush's "infallibility complex" more than two years ago, and I wasn't being original.

So why did the press credit Mr. Bush with virtues that reporters knew he didn't possess? One answer is misplaced patriotism. After 9/11 much of the press seemed to reach a collective decision that it was necessary, in the interests of national unity, to suppress criticism of the commander in chief.

Another answer is the tyranny of evenhandedness. Moderate and liberal journalists, both reporters and commentators, often bend over backward to say nice things about conservatives. Not long ago, many commentators who are now caustic Bush critics seemed desperate to differentiate themselves from "irrational Bush haters" who were neither haters nor irrational—and whose critiques look pretty mild in the light of recent revelations.

And some journalists just couldn't bring themselves to believe that the president of the United States was being dishonest about such grave matters.

Finally, let's not overlook the role of intimidation. After 9/11, if you were thinking of saying anything negative about the president, you had to be prepared for an avalanche of hate mail. You had to expect right-wing pundits and publications to do all they could to ruin your reputation, and you had to worry about being denied access to the sort of insider information that is the basis of many journalistic careers.

The Bush administration, knowing all this, played the press like a fiddle. But has that era come to an end?

A new Pew survey finds 55 percent of journalists in the national media believing that the press has not been critical enough of Mr. Bush, compared with only 8 percent who believe that it has been too critical. More important, journalists seem to be acting on that belief.

Amazing things have been happening lately. The usual suspects have tried to silence reporting about prison abuses by accusing critics of undermining the troops—but the reports keep coming. The attorney general has called yet another terror alert—but the press raised questions about why. (At a White House morning briefing, Terry Moran

of ABC News actually said what many thought during other conveniently timed alerts: “There is a disturbing possibility that you are manipulating the American public in order to get a message out.”)

It may not last. In July 2002, according to Dana Milbank of The Washington Post—who has tried, at great risk to his career, to offer a realistic picture of the Bush presidency—“the White House press corps showed its teeth” for the first time since 9/11. It didn’t last: the administration beat the drums of war, and most of the press relapsed into docility.

But this time may be different. And if it is, Mr. Bush—who has always depended on that docility—may be in even more trouble than the latest polls suggest.