

[dying for a lie]

## *Pinocchio Presidency*

The administration has marred its credibility—and America's.

**By Doug Bandow**

“ONCE WE HAVE VICTORY in Baghdad, all the critics will look like fools,” Vice President Richard Cheney declared in 2002. Alas, a year after invading Iraq, those looking like fools are concentrated in the administration, which apparently took America into war based on a lie. “We were all wrong,” says David Kay, who spent several fruitless months searching for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

It is time for George W. Bush to admit that he, too, was wrong. But this president has proved as unwilling as Bill Clinton to admit a mistake. “There is no doubt in my mind that Saddam Hussein was a grave and gathering threat to America and the world,” maintained President Bush, even as he bowed to pressure and promised an investigation into erroneous U.S. intelligence claims.

And Vice President Cheney continues to claim that two trailers discovered after the war were part of a biological weapons program, despite rebuttals by both Kay and the CIA. He also says that the administration has yet to give up hope of finding WMD: “We still don't know the whole extent of what they did have.” Similarly, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld says that WMD might still turn up. But Kay calls such hopes

holding out “for a Hail-Mary pass.” “I believe we have enough evidence now to say that the intelligence process, and the policy process that used that information, did not work at the level of effectiveness that we require in the age that we live in,” he says. So some conservative commentators now call Saddam Hussein himself a WMD.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the administration's failure to find weapons of mass destruction and, equally important, to acknowledge its error. The signature issue for the Bush presidency has been the War on Terror, and the most important aspect of that campaign has been the war in Iraq. Yet far from basking in glory while its opponents looked like fools, the administration now finds its and America's credibility ruined.

At home, a majority of Americans say that they believe the president deliberately exaggerated, or lied about, evidence on Iraq's alleged possession of WMD. The percentage of Americans who see Bush as “honest and trustworthy” has fallen from a high of 71 percent in mid-2002 to 52 percent in February 2004. A Pew survey found the most common description of Bush was “liar.” For the first time since the war was won, a majority declared that it was not worth fighting.

Equally significant is the impact on U.S. credibility overseas. “The foreign policy blow-back is pretty serious,” says Kenneth Adelman, a member of the Pentagon's Defense Advisory Board who famously predicted that the war would be a “cakewalk.” Governments of “Old Europe” feel vindicated in their opposition to us. Former National Security Council Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski writes, “There is manifest resentment of recent American conduct and a pervasive distrust of America's leaders, even in countries that have participated in the coalition in Iraq.” UN Secretary General Kofi Annan notes “damage” to U.S. credibility: people “are going to be very suspicious when we try to use intelligence to justify certain actions.”

Until the administration decided on war, it proclaimed that Iraq had been contained. In July 2001, NSC Adviser Condoleezza Rice argued, “We are able to keep arms from [Hussein]. His military forces have not been rebuilt.” In September of that year, Vice President Cheney declared: “Saddam Hussein is bottled up.”

In February 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared that sanctions had worked. Saddam Hussein “has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass

destruction. He is unable to project conventional power against his neighbors.” Similarly, Secretary Powell testified before Congress:

The Iraqi regime militarily remains fairly weak. It does not have the capacity it had 10 or 12 years ago. It has been contained, and even though we have no doubt in our mind that the Iraqi regime is pursuing programs to develop weapons of mass destruction, chemical, biological, and nuclear, I think the best intelligence estimate suggests that they have not been terribly successful.

There is no question that they have some stockpiles of some of these sorts of weapons still under their control. But they have not been able to break out, they have not been able to come out with a capability to deliver these kinds of systems, or to actually have these kinds of systems. That is much beyond where they were 10 years ago. So containment using this arms control sanctions regime I think has been reasonably successful.

That was when facts still mattered to the administration. Once it decided upon war, its position changed. President Bush used last year’s State of the Union speech to paint Iraq as a dire and imminent threat to America. War was necessary, he explained, since “our nation and the world” could “not allow an even greater threat [than North Korea] to rise up in Iraq.” Hussein, said Bush, could develop enough anthrax “to kill several million people.” Iraq had botulinum toxin that could “subject millions of people to death.” Moreover, the Hussein regime “had the materials to produce as much as 500 tons of sarin, mustard and VX nerve agent,” which could “kill untold thousands.” Baghdad possessed chemical munitions, mobile

biological weapons labs, and an earlier nuclear program, and had allegedly attempted to buy “significant quantities of uranium from Africa.”

In a speech delivered in Cincinnati in October 2002, President Bush went further. He claimed, “surveillance photos reveal that the regime is rebuilding facilities that it had used to produce chemical and biological weapons.” Iraq had ballistic missiles “with a likely range of hundreds of miles.” The president warned that not only might Saddam Hussein use such weapons on his neighbors, he might transfer them to terrorists. Indeed, he proclaimed, “Iraq could decide on any given day to provide biological or chemical weapons to a terrorist group or individual terrorists.” Thus, he concluded, “The threat from Iraq stands alone—because it gathers the most serious dangers of our age in one place.”

Finally, in his televised ultimatum when he demanded that Hussein leave Iraq within 48 hours, he asserted, “Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised.” Thus, “The danger is clear: using chemical, biological or, one day, nuclear weapons, obtained with the help of Iraq, the terrorists could fulfill

Secretary of State Powell provided a lengthy bill of particulars in his celebrated presentation to the UN Security Council. “Saddam Hussein could have produced 25,000 liters” of anthrax and had accounted for none of it. “Saddam Hussein has never accounted for vast amounts of chemical weaponry: 550 artillery shells with mustard [gas], 30,000 empty munitions and enough precursors to increase his stockpile to as much as 500 tons of chemical agents.” Powell added that Washington estimated that Iraq had stockpiled “between 100 and 500 tons of chemical weapons agent. That is enough agent to fill 16,000 battlefield rockets.” Secretary Powell also cited unmanned aerial vehicles, which “are well suited for dispensing chemical and biological weapons.” In fact, Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla.) and Rep. Paul E. Kanjorski (D-Penn.) said that the administration claimed in a classified briefing that Iraq could target American cities with UAVs. Secretary Rumsfeld argued that Iraq had “large, unaccounted-for stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons—including VX, sarin, cyclo-sarin, and mustard gas; anthrax, botulism, and possibly smallpox.”

Moreover, the threat was immediate—though administration officials seem to have since forgotten they once said so. On

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their stated ambitions and kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in our country or any other.”

These charges were regularly repeated by other administration officials. Three days before the U.S. invaded Iraq, Vice President Cheney declared, “We believe he has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons.”

March 14, Rumsfeld claimed on “Face the Nation,” “critics are the only people I’ve heard use the phrase ‘immediate threat.’ I didn’t. The president didn’t. And it’s become kind of folklore that that’s what happened.” Unfortunately for Rumsfeld, Bob Schieffer and co-interrogator Thomas Friedman were prepared with examples of just such administration claims. In fact, the

administration chorus was overwhelming: no delay was possible. In his Cincinnati speech, Bush explained, “The danger is already significant, and it only grows worse with time. If we know Saddam Hussein has dangerous weapons today—and we do—does it make any sense for the world to wait to confront him?”

When asked in May 2003 whether the U.S. went to war because Iraq’s WMD “were a direct and imminent threat to the United States,” presidential spokesman Ari Fleischer responded, “Absolutely.” Direct and imminent. A year ago, Fleischer’s deputy (and current press secretary) Scott McClellan argued that NATO should follow the administration because “this is about imminent threat.”

Various officials, from the president on down, declared that the Hussein regime was “a threat,” “a significant threat,” “the most dangerous threat of our time,” a “threat to the region and the world,” “a threat to the security of free nations,” “a serious threat to our country, to our friends and to our allies,” a “unique and urgent threat,” and “a serious and mounting threat.” Indeed, said Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, “No terrorist state poses a greater or more immediate threat to the security of our people and the stability of the world.”

Even in March 2004, NSC Adviser Condoleezza Rice still claimed that the Hussein regime was “the most dangerous regime in the world’s most dangerous region,” and thus a greater threat than North Korea. When pressed by Tim Russert about the administration’s many obviously false claims of imminent danger, Rice responded: “it is an urgent threat and I believe to this day that it was an urgent threat.”

Powerful rhetoric. Too bad that none of it was true.

So far, the U.S. has found not one WMD. There were no reconstituted nuclear weapons, no uranium purchases from Africa. The much-cited aluminum

tubes purchased by Iraq were almost certainly intended for use by conventional missiles. Reported David Kay, who ran America’s Iraq Survey Group, “information found to date suggests that Iraq’s large-scale capability to develop, produce, and fill new CW munitions was reduced—if not entirely destroyed—during Operations Desert Storm and Desert Fox, 13 years of U.N. sanctions, and U.N. inspections.” He added, “We have not yet been able to corroborate the existence of a mobile biological weapons production effort.” Indeed, “Technical limitations would prevent any of these processes from being ideally suited to these trailers.” Nor have any ocean-spanning UAVs turned up. In fact, Kay’s search discovered some “contemporary documents” proving that Iraq had destroyed its weapons. His final assessment: “I don’t think they [Iraqi WMDs] existed.”

A recently released Carnegie Endowment report found that Baghdad’s nuclear program had been dismantled and nerve agents “had lost most of their lethality *as early as* 1991.” Any threat from biological weapons would be in the future, not the present. The only

But then, posing a threat to America was not why the administration went to war. Ray McGovern, who chaired the National Intelligence Estimates during his 27-year federal career, notes, “the Bush administration’s decision for war against Iraq came well before any intelligence estimate.” Instead, intelligence was gathered to support a prior decision. As former Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill pointed out, “From the very beginning, there was a conviction that Saddam Hussein was a bad person and that he needed to go.” Another official supported O’Neill’s account, telling ABC News that at NSC meetings in early 2001 President Bush “told his Pentagon officials to explore the military options, including use of ground forces” to oust Hussein.

The failure to find any WMD has created widespread concern about the sacrifice of U.S. credibility in pursuit of the administration’s ideological agenda. Even conservative columnist Jonah Goldberg, whose enthusiasm for the war remains undiminished, believes that President Bush should have admitted his error. Conservative TV personality

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active program seemed to involve longer-range missiles incapable of reaching America. Not only were there no WMD, but “there was no evidence to support the claim that Iraq would have transferred WMD to al Qaeda and much evidence to counter it.” Carnegie concluded that Iraq’s WMD efforts did not “pose an immediate threat.”

In short, nothing that the president said was true, which means that Iraq posed no threat, especially not an immediate one.

Bill O’Reilly admits, “I was wrong,” and plans to be “much more skeptical about the Bush administration now.” Ramesh Ponnuru, an editor at *National Review*, acknowledges that “the argument for [the war’s] urgency—the argument that time was not on our side—has lost a lot of its force.” Columnist and Fox News commentator Morton Kondracke admitted that the argument that had “convinced people in Congress” and him to go war had turned out to be false.

The most important disaffected hawk might be Secretary of State Powell. In a February interview with the *Washington Post*, he was asked if he would have recommended an invasion if he had known that Iraq possessed no WMD. "I don't know, because it was the stockpile that presented the final little piece that made it more of a real and present danger and threat to the region and to the world," he responded. The "absence of a stockpile changes the political calculus; it changes the answer you get." That answer did not go over well elsewhere in the administration. A day later Powell loyally declared, "The president made the right decision."

How could so many supposedly bright people have gotten it so wrong? In fact, we were not "all wrong," as David Kay said. John B. Judis and Spencer Ackerman of the *New Republic* point out, "Unbeknownst to the public, the administration faced equally serious opposition within its own intelligence agencies." The CIA inappropriately turned incomplete information into specific warnings, focusing on worst-case scenarios, in the view of the Senate Intelligence Committee. Said Chairman Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), "The picture in regards to intelligence is not very flattering." Even so, at the CIA many analysts and officials were skeptical that Iraq posed an imminent threat. Greg Thielmann, formerly head of the State Department's intelligence bureau, explained, "I think it [Iraq] didn't even constitute an imminent threat to its neighbors at the time we went to war." The Defense Intelligence Agency, Department of Energy, U.S. Air Force, and International Atomic Energy Agency also criticized particular administration claims. The top-secret version of the National Intelligence Estimate concerning Iraq contained some 40 caveats and dissenting views—which were left out of the public release. Perhaps most significant was the conclusion



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of the UN inspectors on the ground in Iraq who found no WMD.

Such contrary conclusions were not what the president and his war-minded aides wanted to hear. So they found ways, including repeated visits to the CIA, to pressure the intelligence services to offer an appropriate rationale for attacking Iraq. Observed Thielmann, "The main problem was that the senior administration officials have what I call faith-based intelligence. They knew what they wanted the intelligence to show."

Top officials made their preferences clear. As Spencer Ackerman and Franklin Foer write, administration claims "were not pieces of objective evidence that the administration relied on to formulate its Iraq policy. Rather, they were products of an intelligence process that the administration—and the Office of the Vice President, in particular—had already politicized in order to justify its Iraq policy."

The insistence on believing what they wanted to believe may be most obvious in the administration's reliance on Ahmad Chalabi, the Iraqi exile convicted of bank fraud. Now a member of the Iraqi Governing Council, Chalabi made light of his consistently erroneous claims in early February: America was now in Baghdad, and little else mattered. "We are heroes in error," he joked. (Amazingly, the Pentagon has budgeted \$3 million to \$4 million this year for continued payments to Chalabi's Iraqi

National Congress for its so-called Information Collection Program.)

Finally, the president and his aides were highly selective in their claims. Not only did they "dismantle the existing filtering process that for fifty years had been preventing the policymakers from getting bad information," writes Kenneth Pollack, a member of the Clinton NSC staff who favored war with Iraq. But "the administration was only telling part of the truth to the American people because it was trying to justify a war in 2003." The most obvious way to demonstrate alleged imminence of a threat was an al-Qaeda connection and possession of nuclear weapons, "and the administration was grossly distorting the intelligence on both things," said Thielmann.

Once the truth came out, the president could have responded as a serious person: he could have taken responsibility for his claims and acknowledged that he had been wrong. He could have added that the administration relied on the best evidence that it had. He could have pointed out that other countries believed that Iraq had WMD. He might have promised to investigate what went wrong with U.S. intelligence-gathering. In short, he could have acted like a steadfast chief executive who regretted that he had taken the nation into war on a falsehood.

But no. In this year's State of the Union speech, George W. Bush talked about liberating Iraq. He cited the challenge of the

occupation. But he devoted just two sentences to WMD, noting the presence of “dozens of weapons of mass destruction-related program activities.” No weapons. No weapons close to production. No weapons of mass destruction programs. But “weapons of mass destruction-related program activities.” When pressed by ABC’s Diane Sawyer on the issue, Bush responded that there was a “possibility” Hussein could have acquired them. “So what’s the difference?” asked Bush. A lot. As surely the president knows.

CIA Director George Tenet knows. He implicitly admitted to the Senate Armed Services Committee that administration officials have misstated the evidence. “If there are areas where I thought someone said something they shouldn’t say, I talked to them about it,” he explained.

And the American people know. WMD deceptions are a major reason that the percentage of people believing Bush to be honest and trustworthy has fallen to 52 percent. They have less reason to trust any president, and especially this one, in the future. When challenged by Tim Russert for having believed that Hussein possessed WMD, former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean responded, “I did, because the president told us. And I’m inclined to believe presidents in most circumstances. I think most Americans, Democrats or Republicans, ought to believe the president of the United States when he does something as serious as send us to war.”

They ought to, but they obviously can’t any longer.

If only President Bush were suffering, then one could feel satisfied that he was simply receiving just recompense. Alas, the U.S., too, has paid a huge price for the administration’s error. Indeed, the surprise defeat of Spain’s conservative party is more easily explained as a reaction against the incumbent government’s discredited decision to back the Bush administration in Iraq than as an

attempt to “appease” terrorists. So, too, the new government’s intention to remove its 1,300 troops from Iraq. Stated Prime Minister-elect Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero: “The war has been a disaster; the occupation continues to be a great disaster. It hasn’t generated anything but more violence and hate.” He would not likely have spoken this way had the Bush administration discovered massive WMD stockpiles. After all, observed Zapatero, “time has shown that the arguments for it lacked credibility...” Even more blunt was his pronouncement, “you can’t organize a war with lies.” Now another former steadfast ally, Poland, is complaining about being misled and has threatened to withdraw its occupation forces ahead of schedule.

And administration credibility is suffering far beyond Europe. Regarding North Korea, for instance, China is questioning U.S. claims that Pyongyang has a highly enriched uranium program. Whispers of doubt also are being heard in Japan and South Korea. Even if Washington is correct, it is ill positioned to persuade

spond too slowly to the next tyrant or terrorist?” Thank the Bush administration.

Only by confessing the truth can Washington begin to repair the damage. That is, for the president to take responsibility and acknowledge that he was wrong. But there’s an even more important issue. Conservatives, in particular, once fought passionately to preserve America as a limited, constitutional Republic, which means that they should take the lead in demanding that the administration be held accountable. The president’s attempt to change the subject, dismiss his critics, and otherwise avoid responsibility is an affront to our democratic principles of government. It matters if the president lied to the American people, if the administration manipulated evidence, if intelligence operations are flawed or if analysts were pressured. It matters if America went to war based on a lie. An intelligence failure doesn’t necessarily mean that the administration is guilty of misbehavior. But Americans should demand that the president defend his decision.

## IMAGINE THE **BUSH ADMINISTRATION** TRYING TO CREATE ANOTHER INTERNATIONAL COALITION BASED ON **AMERICAN INTELLIGENCE**.

anyone. Imagine the Bush administration trying to create another international coalition based on American intelligence, or claiming that Syria or Iran or another country possesses a dangerous WMD capability, or arguing that another destitute, isolated state posed a direct and immediate security threat. Imagine an American campaign to win global support for another preventive war.

That is the great tragedy: Washington will find it hard to lead even if its leadership is critically required. Asks Michael Ignatieff of the Kennedy School of Government, “What if the example of Iraq leads electorates and politicians to re-

The failure to find WMD doesn’t take “away from the merit of the case” for war, says Secretary Powell. No, it destroys it. Along with the president’s and America’s credibility. Republicans rightly criticized Bill Clinton for refusing to take responsibility for his manifold failings. President George W. Bush is taking the same path. It appears that he was wrong, and if he cares about American credibility and democracy, he should admit the truth. ■

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# Truth to Power

Richard Clarke, Public Enemy #1

By Justin Raimondo

THE RELEASE OF Richard Clarke's book and his testimony at the 9/11 Commission was the signal for the Smear Brigade to go to work and create a new hate object for the neocon Right. Their goal was summed up by Matt Drudge in a pithy two-word headline: "Get Him!" The problem is, he has already gotten them—right between the eyes.

*Against All Enemies* makes a powerful case against the broad approach to the War on Terror championed by this administration, arguing in favor of uprooting al-Qaeda rather than changing the composition of the soil it grows in, i.e., "transforming" the greater part of the Middle East.

Dubbed "Delenda Est," after the daily imprecation called down on Carthage by the Roman senator Cato, Clarke's aggressive and focused proposal languished in the lower reaches of the national-security bureaucracy while this administration essentially abandoned the fight against al-Qaeda because it had already decided to go to war with Iraq and saw bin Laden, as Paul Wolfowitz put it, as "that little man in Afghanistan."

By the late summer of 2001, Clarke and CIA Director George Tenet were convinced that "a major series of attacks" was on the horizon. At the time, Clarke noted intelligence pointing to an attack overseas, "in Israel or Saudi

Arabia. Maybe. But maybe it will be here." After fighting since January for a high-level national-security briefing focused on al-Qaeda, Clarke finally managed to get the attention of the Bush administration on September 4, 2001 and made his case for focusing on al-Qaeda. Rumsfeld looked distracted and kept bringing up Iraq. Clarke's proposal to send an armed Predator drone after bin Laden was vetoed.

So what is the administration's answer to Clarke? Well, it turns out that he's Rand Beers's best friend, you see, and Beers is advising John Kerry. So there!

Even more pathetic is the call by Sen. Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) to prosecute Clarke because he supposedly "lied under oath" and said the Bush administration was on the ball at a hearing in 2002. Why stop with Clarke? Let's weigh the loyalty of every administration official who ever put a positive spin on his bosses' performance while privately holding to a more skeptical view. That should quickly depopulate Washington, D.C.

In a memo dated September 4, 2001, Clarke urged Condoleezza Rice and others "to imagine a day after a terrorist attack, with hundreds of Americans dead at home and abroad, and ask themselves

what they could have done earlier."

*National Review Online* has an answer to this. Clarke is "the long-suffering guy who wants us to know that he's always right, that everybody else is always wrong, that his boss is nuts, and that he would have spoken up sooner, but he was having some very serious computer problems." Clarke at the hearings, opines Denis Boyles, was like "Dilbert on Springer."

Is this really the way to characterize someone who accurately predicted the worst terrorist attack in American history? Clarke isn't Dilbert—he's Cassandra. This isn't low comedy; it's high tragedy.

Charles Krauthammer, who was once a psychiatrist, diagnoses Clarke as "clearly an angry man, angry that Rice demoted him, angry that he was denied a coveted bureaucratic job by the Bush administration. Angry and unreliable. He told the commission to disregard

