

# THEIR UNSPOKEN CREDO: PERPETUAL DECEPTION

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## THE MOST DANGEROUS LIE OF ALL: THAT THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION IS CONDUCTING A SERIOUS WAR ON TERROR

**D**avid Corn writes in the introduction to *The Lies of George W. Bush*: "So constant is his fibbing that a history of his lies is a close approximation of the history of his presidential tenure." Exposing, dissecting, and cataloging the lies of President Bush and his administration and allies in the right-wing media has in fact become a flourishing

cottage industry. In addition to Corn's book, there have been Al Franken's *Lies (And the Lying Liars Who Tell Them): A Fair and Balanced Look at the Right*, Joe Conason's *Big Lies: The Right Wing Propaganda Machine and How It Distorts the Truth*, Paul Waldman's *Fraud: The Strategy Behind the Bush Lies and Why the Media Didn't Tell You About It*,

Kevin Phillips's *American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune and the Politics of Deceit* (which launches its broadside against the Bush family as a whole), and *The Book on Bush: How George W. (Mis)Leads America*, by Eric Alterman and Mark Green, as well as an excellent documentary film called *Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War*, directed by Robert Greenwald.

So *Tin House* is not exactly breaking new ground in offering up some choice examples of this president's nonstop mendacity in the photo spread and compilation of administration lies which follow, although in my opinion the situation is such that attention cannot be drawn to this phenomenon often enough. But at a panel discussion I attended recently, I stumbled onto what may be the biggest, and most dangerous, lie of all: that the Bush administration is conducting a serious War on Terrorism.

This panel addressed the question "How Have We Fared in the War Against Terrorism?" Its members included a former high State Department official, a former CIA station chief, current and former military personnel, and a member of the 9/11 commission. With the exception of a member of the Bush Administration

(who did not actually speak up very forcefully, but kept quiet on most of the central questions and departed early), they answered this question the same

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way: Not well. Not well at all. The first panelist to speak led off by arguing that the very idea of a War on Terrorism is fallacious: Wars, he pointed out, are fought between organized governments, and the terrorist threat comes not from a government or governments but from an international criminal conspiracy called al-Qaeda. "Once you have confused these two things," he said, "you have confused everything." Another panelist echoed this thought on the specific issue of Iraq. "Iraq," he said, "was attacked because it was vulnerable and could provide a quick military victory. It is no part of the War on Terrorism—the very notion is wrong." A foreign journalist member of the panel observed: "A lot of these actions seem to be taken not to combat terrorism but frankly to rule the world." Someone else commented: "It is my understanding that the goal of al-Qaeda is to reduce American influence around

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the world, and it seems to me that we have helped them to be remarkably successful in achieving that goal.”

The member of the 9/11 commission told us that while he wasn't at liberty to provide details, in his opinion intelligence existed in the government prior

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to 9/11 sufficient, if used properly, and “with a little luck,” to have prevented that tragedy. A fellow panelist agreed with that assessment, and submitted that since the real problem prior to 9/11 was not so much lack of information available to the government as lack of coordination between the agencies possessing key information, the panicked legislative solution of the so-called Patriot Act was unnecessary and irrelevant (the Patriot Act has been used so far to prosecute only one terrorist suspect, and he had been on a government watch list for years before 9/11). It was pointed out that not one of the people rounded up in the aftermath of 9/11 and held without benefit of counsel has been charged with a terrorist act or conspiracy. Quite a number of panelists

dwelled on the fact that “homeland security” is being seriously underfunded (as are all domestic programs) by the Bush administration, particularly with respect to our ports (the budget of the Coast Guard has actually been cut), which everyone in the field of domestic security seems to agree are our most vulnerable targets; one speaker painted a hair-raising portrait of how the destruction of a single port and the fear and panic engendered by that could bring our commerce to a virtual standstill. Not one speaker considered the Department of Homeland Security a very serious enterprise; to cite a single fact mentioned, it has been receiving less funding per annum than we are expending on the Iraq venture. The general consensus of the group: other than taking down al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, at least temporarily (no one on the panel spoke critically of that war, but many deplored the U.S.'s lack of financial and peacekeeping follow-up there), the Bush administration has not accomplished very much to make America more secure, and may have, through its antagonizing of our allies and the entire Muslim world, made the situation more perilous than ever.

A report published by the Army War College last January supported the gist of what these panelists conveyed. The report, written by visiting research pro-

fessor Jeffrey Record, a former staff member of the Senate Armed Services Committee who also teaches at the Air Force War College, called the war in Iraq “an unnecessary preventative war that has diverted attention and resources away from securing the American homeland against further assault by an undeterrable al-Qaeda,” and added that the Iraq war was a “detour” from the war on terrorism. “The global war on terror as presently defined and conducted is strategically unfocused, promises much more than it can deliver, and threatens to dissipate U.S. military and other resources in an endless and hopeless search for absolute security,” the report said. The report warned that the Bush administration’s actions may have set the United States “on a course of open-ended and gratuitous conflict with states and non-state entities that pose no serious threat to the United States.” Daniel Benjamin, a former member of the National Security Council, commented regarding Record’s report, “The criticism does not seem out of line with many of the conversations I have had with officers in every branch of the service.”

In late February, the Republican-controlled House Select Committee on Homeland Security issued a report that stated, “One year after the creation of Department of Homeland Security (DHS), dangerous security gaps remain

that place America at risk to the threat of terrorist attack.” Among the “gaps” cited by the committee: ports and borders are still vulnerable; “airport screeners continue to allow dangerous items to enter U.S. passenger planes”; nuclear weapons and materials within the former Soviet Union and around the world remain insecure. The committee complained that the DHS has not yet completed a “threat and vulnerability assessment,” a “bio-defense preparedness and response plan,” or a “national critical infrastructure risk assessment,” and that it has not yet even “harmonized basic computer systems to manage the department.” Meanwhile, the General Accounting Office found that “federal regulators are still doing little to make sure the nation’s chemical plants are safe from terrorist attacks,” and CIA Director George Tenet flatly stated that America is not safer than it was when the DHS was created (or, by implication, before we invaded Iraq or before Saddam was captured).

If the Bush administration is not actually dealing seriously, or at least not anywhere nearly seriously enough, with what it purports to consider the defining issue and major challenge of the era, what then is it really up to? Good question. Frankly, the answer is elusive. One could equally well ask, why is an administration peopled with supposedly hard-headed businessmen taking the

country down a road to possible bankruptcy and financial ruin, something that is not in their interest any more than it is in ours. (Leading economist and *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman has posited a financial collapse on the order of Argentina's recent one, and the International Monetary Fund has warned that America's spiraling structural deficit threatens world economic stability.) The closest I can come to a plausible answer to these questions is to hypothesize that it is the mentality and proclivity of the Republicans in power in Washington now to impose a rigid and extremist ideology on the world regardless of the facts or needs of any given situation, in the spirit perhaps of philosopher David Hume and his dictum, "If the theory and the facts don't agree, so much the worse for the facts." And in imposing or attempting to impose their ideology, they spin a misleading alternative version of reality for the public, with pseudo-facts and 1984-like slogans. An effort to gut the safety net of social security becomes "social security reform," a blatantly regressive tax cut that was originally presented as a way to return a surplus generated by a good economy becomes a "jobs creation program" in a bad one, and a threat of terrorism that originates in the fanatical Wahabi Muslim sect of Saudi Arabia becomes the pretext for invading a secular Iraq.

Nowhere is this drive to fabricate a false version of reality better exemplified than in Vice President Dick Cheney's successful effort to manufacture ostensible evidence of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in that country, which *Newsweek* (Nov. 17) and the *New Republic* (Dec. 1) have detailed. Despite efforts to scapegoat them, much of the intelligence community was dubious that Saddam had reconstituted his nuclear weapons program or had any significant amounts of chemical or biological weapons left. They rejected the notion that Iraq had any involvement in 9/11 or any substantial ties with al-Qaeda. Cheney reacted with two maneuvers. One, out of the Office of the Vice President, and then through the Office of Special Plans (OSP) in the Pentagon (a kind of pro-war counterweight to the Defense Intelligence Agency, DIA, a former aide of his set up there), he labored to transmogrify various unsubstantiated rumors, like the Niger yellow-cake fiction and uncorroborated reports from the exile group the Iraqi National Congress (INC) into respectable intelligence and then to use it to browbeat the CIA and other agencies into agreement or at least silence. (A subsequent DIA study has shown virtually all the information furnished by INC members to have been utterly worthless.) Second, he outright lied, saying numerous times in public

that there was convincing evidence of a nuclear weapons program in Iraq and of ties between Saddam and al-Qaeda. On the verge of the war, a strong majority of the American public had come to believe these things were true, and also that Saddam was responsible for 9/11, something administration spokespeople like Cheney never asserted outright but frequently implied. (Ironically, during the 1990s Cheney's wife, Lynne, wrote a book called *Telling the Truth*, in which she inveighed against postmodern theories which hold that reality is not an objective a priori framework but is socially constructed by those who hold power. More ironically, every chapter begins with a quote from George Orwell.)

George W. Bush, despite having attended Andover, Yale, and Harvard, is a remarkably uneducated man, so it is unlikely that he knows very much about the political philosopher Leo Strauss. Plenty of people in his administration and the American right wing do, however, and adhere strongly to his amoral and chilling notions. These people include, among others, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz (who studied under Strauss at the University of Chicago), one of the foremost advocates of the Iraq invasion ("We are looking at a country that can really finance its own reconstruction, and relatively soon"), and Abram Shulsky, head of the aforementioned OSP

(who once penned an essay called "Leo Strauss and the World of Intelligence"). In an article on Alternet entitled "Leo Strauss' Philosophy of Deception," Jim Lobe has written:

It is hardly surprising why Strauss is so popular in an administration obsessed with secrecy, especially when it comes to matters of foreign policy. Not only did Strauss have few qualms about using deception in politics, he saw it as a necessity. While professing deep respect for American democracy, Strauss believed that societies should be hierarchical—divided between an elite who should lead, and the masses who should follow. But unlike fellow elitists like Plato, he was less concerned with the moral character of these leaders. According to Shadia Drury, who teaches political science at the University of Calgary, Strauss believed that 'those who are fit to rule are those who realize that there is no morality and that there is only one natural right—the right of the superior to rule over the inferior.'

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This dichotomy requires "perpetual deception between the rulers and the ruled," according to Drury.

Perpetual Deception—the unspoken credo of the Bush administration? See for yourself in the pages ahead. †