

The presidential press conference

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According to an old adage, even lies should make some sense. This is a rule that the president of the United States—for reasons that are principally political but also partly neurological—is unable to observe. The political aims of the Bush administration require such a blatant and continuous falsification of reality that all connection is lost between what the president says and what masses of people generally perceive. The lies of the administration necessarily assume, therefore, a grotesque “in your face” character.

Matters are not helped by the fact that the president lacks the mental capacity, let alone the intellectual discipline, to construct a logical argument. Yet, no matter how absurd and illogical his statements, the people are expected to accept, without thought or reflection, whatever the president says. That is, they are expected to behave like the personnel of the mass media.

In the hours leading up to the president’s press conference of Thursday night, the media predicted that Bush would use the occasion to explain to the American people why the invasion of Iraq is necessary and unavoidable. What he actually provided was a monotonous litany of obvious lies and non sequiturs.

Speaking before a small and vetted audience of media hacks, who understood that they were not to question, even indirectly, the legitimacy of the administration’s drive to war, Bush intoned the standard mindless slogans, revolving endlessly around the same apocalyptic theme: the imminent threat posed by the devil incarnate, Saddam Hussein, and his Weapons of Mass Destruction.

The United States, the president said, is “confronting the threat posed to our nation and to peace by Saddam Hussein and his weapons of terror.”

The noted American historian Richard Hofstadter several decades ago wrote an interesting study of the role of paranoia in American politics. Were he still alive, he might have updated his book with an entire chapter on the current president’s fixation with Saddam Hussein. As one listened to Bush dwell obsessively on the Baghdad bad man, it was difficult to avoid the impression that within the precincts of Dubya’s oddly immature imagination, the Iraqi president has assumed the form of the bogeyman.

“Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction are a direct threat to this country ... I will not leave the American people at the mercy of the Iraqi dictator and his weapons ... Saddam Hussein is a threat to our nation ... It used to be that we could think that you could contain a person like Saddam Hussein, that oceans would protect us from his type of terror ... I believe Saddam Hussein is a threat to the American people ... He’s a murderer ... He’s a master of deception ... the American people know that Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction ...”

Whenever Bush attempted to wander beyond these programmed phrases, he ran into trouble. He made statements that were blatantly false, and were clearly and directly contradicted a little more than 12 hours later by the leaders of the United Nations inspections program, Dr. Hans Blix and Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei.

Bush declared in his opening statement: “Iraqi operatives continue to hide biological and chemical agents to avoid detection by inspectors. In some cases, these materials have been moved to different locations every 12 to 24 hours or placed in vehicles that are in residential neighborhoods.”

This claim, which simply repeats allegations made by Secretary of State Colin Powell in his disastrous presentation to the United Nations last month, was again refuted by Blix in his Friday report to the Security Council.

“As I noted on 14 February,” Blix stated, “intelligence authorities have claimed that weapons of mass destruction are moved around Iraq by trucks and, in particular, that there are mobile production units for biological weapons. The Iraqi side states that such activities do not exist. Several inspections have taken place at declared and undeclared sites in relation to mobile production facilities. Food and mobile workshops have been seen, as well as large containers with seed processing equipment. *No evidence of proscribed activities has so far been found*” (emphasis added).

Bush also declared, “We know from multiple intelligence sources that Iraqi weapons scientists continue to be threatened with harm should they cooperate with UN inspectors.” This claim was also challenged by Blix the following morning. “In the last month,” he stated, “Iraq has provided us with the names of many persons who may be relevant sources of information, in particular, persons who took part in various phases of the unilateral destruction of biological and chemical weapons and proscribed missiles in 1991.”

While acknowledging that the interview process was not free of problems, Blix noted: “the Iraq side seems to have encouraged interviewees not to request the presence of Iraqi officials, so called minders, or the taping of the interviews.” Blix explained that the inspectors intended to request that some interviews be held outside Iraq.

But despite certain shortcomings, Blix offered a positive assessment of the overall progress of the interviews. He judged them to be “useful” and noted that “Since we started requesting interviews, 38 individuals were asked for private interviews, of which 10 accepted under our terms, 7 of these during the past week.”

In the course of his press conference, President Bush declared repeatedly that Iraq was not disarming. In the midst of the very public destruction of Iraq’s Al-Samoud missiles, Bush brazenly proclaimed: “If the Iraqi regime were disarming, we would know it because we would see it. Iraq’s weapons would be presented to inspectors and the world would witness their destruction.” Bush might just as well have said, “Don’t believe what you see, because I’m telling you that you are not seeing it.”

This was too much for the normally unflappable Dr. Blix, who departed from his generally cautious diplomatic phrasing to deliver a mocking riposte to Bush’s preposterous assertion. “The destruction undertaken [of Al-Samoud missiles] constitutes a substantial measure of disarmament—indeed, the first since the middle of the 1990s,” Blix declared in his Security Council report. “We are not watching the breaking of toothpicks. Lethal weapons are being destroyed.”

It is instructive, and also somewhat depressing, to compare the text of Bush’s remarks at his press conference with those of Blix and ElBaradei. In the statements of the president, nothing that can be described even remotely as an argument is to be found. There are, rather, a series of assertions, laid out in sentences that are generally no more than five to ten words long, for which no supporting evidence is presented. A typical example of the Bush method is the following sequence of three sentences:

“Saddam Hussein is not disarming. This is a fact. It cannot be denied.”

One need not be a supporter of the politics or mission of Blix and ElBaradei to recognize that they are both men of high intelligence and skill. They have the ability to integrate and synthesize a vast body of complex evidence. In their own ways, and with the subtlety required by their profession, they actually seek to influence international public opinion through the force of argument. Each conclusion is appropriately referenced to verifiable evidence.

The report of ElBaradei was especially compelling, and even more damning in its refutation of the lies of the Bush administration than that of Hans Blix. He began by pointing out that the objective state of Iraq's industrial infrastructure precludes any possibility that this country is in a position to undertake a serious nuclear weapons program:

“At the outset, let me state one general observation: namely, that during the past four years, at the majority of Iraqi sites, industrial capacity has deteriorated substantially, due to the departure of foreign support that was often present in the late 1980s, the departure of a large number of skilled Iraqi personnel in the past decade, and the lack of consistent maintenance by Iraq of sophisticated equipment. At only a few inspected sites involved in industrial research, development and manufacturing have the facilities been improved and new personnel been taken on. This overall deterioration in industrial capacity is naturally of direct relevance to Iraq's capability for resuming a nuclear weapons program.”

ElBaradei's report gave an indication of the extraordinary scope of the inspections being conducted in Iraq, which directly contradicted the cartoon-like images of clueless inspection personnel, groping blindly in the dark or in the desert for impossible-to-find evidence of weapons of mass destruction, concealed by wily Iraqis.

“The IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) has now conducted a total of 218 inspections at 141 sites, including 21 that had not been inspected before. In addition, the Agency experts have taken part in many joint UNMOVIC-IAEA inspections.

“Technical support for nuclear inspections has continued to expand. The three operational air samplers have collected, from key locations in Iraq, weekly air particulate samples that are being sent to laboratories for analysis. Additional results of water, sediment, vegetation and material sample analyses have been received from the relevant laboratories.

“Our vehicle-borne radiation survey team has covered some 2,000 kilometers over the past three weeks. Survey access has been gained to over 75 facilities, including military garrisons and camps, weapons factories, truck parks, manufacturing facilities and residential areas.”

Perhaps the most important sections of ElBaradei's report were those that responded to claims by the United States and Britain, trumpeted in the press, that the Iraqis had been engaged in illegal efforts to continue their nuclear weapons program.

The United States and Britain had alleged, with great fanfare in late 2002, that Iraq had attempted to import aluminum tubes for the purpose of manufacturing centrifuges required for the secret production of nuclear weapons. This issue was declared by the British and American governments to be a matter of paramount concern in December. Iraq's denials of these allegations were brushed aside by the American and British governments.

ElBaradei reported that the issue of the aluminum tubes had been carefully investigated by the IAEA. Its conclusion: “Extensive field investigation and document analysis have failed to uncover any evidence that Iraq intended to use these 81mm tubes for any project other than the reverse engineering of rockets [as Iraq had explained previously]....

“Based on available evidence, the IAEA team has concluded that Iraq's efforts to import these aluminum tubes were not likely to have been related to the manufacture of centrifuges and, moreover, that it was highly unlikely that Iraq could have achieved the considerable redesign needed to use them in a revived centrifuge program.”

Even more devastating to the Anglo-American propaganda campaign was ElBaradei's exposure of the claim that Iraq had attempted to acquire uranium from Niger. In December 2002, British intelligence claimed to have discovered documents recording an attempt by an Iraqi official to negotiate the purchase of uranium during a visit to Niger in February 1999. In a fact sheet, dated December 19, 2002, the US State Department demanded to know why Iraq's 12,000 page submission to the United Nations “ignores efforts to procure uranium from Niger.” The “fact sheet” asked, “Why is the Iraqi regime hiding their uranium procurement?”

ElBaradei reported to the Security Council:

“With regard to *Uranium Acquisition*, the IAEA had made progress in its investigation into reports that Iraq sought to buy uranium from Niger in recent years. The investigation was centered on documents provided by a number of States that pointed to an agreement between Niger and Iraq for the sale of uranium between 1999 and 2001.

“The IAEA has discussed these reports with the Governments of Iraq and Niger, both of which have denied that any such activity took place. For its part, Iraq has provided the IAEA with a comprehensive explanation of its relations with Niger, and has described a visit by an Iraqi official to a number of African countries, including Niger, in February 1999, which Iraq thought might have given rise to the reports. The IAEA was able to review correspondence coming from various bodies of the Government of Niger, and to compare the form, format, contents and signatures of that correspondence with those of the alleged procurement-related documentation.

“Based on thorough analysis, the IAEA has concluded, with the concurrence of outside experts, that these documents—which formed the basis for the reports of recent uranium transactions between Iraq and Niger—are in fact not authentic. We have therefore concluded that these specific allegations are unfounded” (emphasis added).

If we may be permitted to state the findings in less formal language, the Blair government in London used documents forged by its intelligence agencies to concoct a case for war.

These were eagerly seized upon by the Bush administration, which in all likelihood knew the documents to be bogus, for the same purpose. Given the intended consequences of this fabrication—the invasion of Iraq and the wounding and killing of hundreds of thousands of its people—those who planned, executed and made use of this provocation are criminals in the most profound and essential meaning of the term.

In his conclusion, ElBaradei summed up the results of the IAEA's work in Iraq: “After three months of intrusive inspections, we have to date found no evidence or plausible indication of the revival of a nuclear weapons program in Iraq.”

The joint reports and findings of Blix and ElBaradei comprise a shattering refutation of the statements made by the American president the night before. But, to be frank, if their intention was only to reply to Bush, they provided much more than what was really needed to accomplish that limited task.

To listen to Bush meander aimlessly from one absurdity to another requires not only the suspension of one's judgment, but that one suspend all cognitive activity. Having ringed Iraq with 300,000 troops, Bush declared, for example, that “The form and leadership of that government is for the Iraqi people to choose.” Five minutes later, he stated, “We will be changing the regime of Iraq for the good of the Iraqi people.”

The entire press conference abounded in such stupid and thoughtless contradictions.

Even those of us who, by dint of professional responsibility, are obliged to listen and read what the president says cannot help but feel that they have been somehow degraded by the experience. Despite the proverbial six degrees of separation, one is ashamed by the spectacle of ignorance, cynicism and sadism that is being televised from the White House. After all, Abraham Lincoln once lived in that building.



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