

The resignation of Ari Fleischer: Bush's official liar goes for the gold

Barry Grey
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With his resignation announcement last week, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer neared the end of his tenure as the official mouthpiece for an administration that has made secrecy and lies the basis of its political operations.

Whoever replaces Fleischer after his July exit will, without question, continue in the same disreputable vein. Nevertheless, those of us who are obliged, by dint of our political and professional responsibilities, to watch the charades that pass for White House press briefings cannot but feel a measure of relief that we shall soon be spared the ordeal of watching a smirking Fleischer spout the day's deceptions before a cynical and cowed press corps.

Lack of candor in the White House is by no means a new feature of American politics. But this administration, from Bush on down, dissembles without shame or limit. Its use of the lie as its essential modus operandi reflects its social and political character. It is the political embodiment of the most predatory elements within the ruling elite, whose policies are single-mindedly directed toward the further enrichment of the most privileged layers at the expense of the working class. It is obliged, given the lack of popular support for its program and the extreme narrowness of its social base, to utilize a species of Orwellian "newspeak" that would make the author of *1984* marvel.

In the political lexicon of contemporary Washington, tax windfalls for the rich are measures for "job creation" and "relief" for hard-working Americans, police-state methods are the front line in the defense of "freedom", and military aggression is the *sine qua non* for keeping the peace. Budget figures are manipulated, social indices are fudged, and the most important decisions affecting the lives of countless millions both at home and abroad are taken behind closed doors.

In Ari Fleischer, the ruling clique that came to power on the basis of electoral fraud and the technique of the Big Lie found a willing and eager tool. As White House press secretary, Fleischer exhibited the contempt for democratic principles such as press freedom and the people's right to know that pervades the Bush administration.

The outgoing press secretary is an exceptionally unpleasant example of the political mandarin species. He personifies the crass opportunism and greed that characterize the social layer that enriched itself during the past quarter century of political reaction and corporate criminality. He evinces this layer's combination of careerism and misanthropy that make it eminently suitable to serve the most anti-social ends.

The post of White House press secretary has rarely attracted people of high intellectual or moral caliber, but Fleischer exemplifies a lack of political substance that is a hallmark of the personnel in the current administration, beginning with the intellectual cipher at the top. While Bush's National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice has let it be

known that her secret ambition is to become commissioner of the National Football League, Fleischer said his first choice for a post-government career was to play shortstop for the New York Yankees baseball team.

Fleischer, 42, was born and raised in the town of Pound Ridge, an exclusive enclave in West Chester County, some 60 miles north of New York City. He comes from a wealthy Jewish family and was raised as a Democrat. He switched to the Republicans at the time of Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and decided to make his career in the service of the right-wing counterattack on the social reforms enacted over the preceding decades—a drive whose central target was the working class.

One of a significant number of Jews in prominent posts in the Bush administration, he personifies the rightward trajectory of a substantial section of better-off American Jews over the past several decades. In this political phenomenon, the general process of social and political polarization in America merges with the reactionary evolution of Zionism.

Fleischer was press secretary to Senator Pete Domenici, Republican of New Mexico, from 1989 to 1994, and later served as spokesman for the Republican-controlled House Ways and Means Committee. Early in the 2000 presidential race he was spokesman for Republican hopeful Elizabeth Dole. When Dole dropped out of the race for the Republican nomination, he joined the front-running campaign of Bush and soon became its press mouthpiece.

He played a prominent role as a propagandist for the Bush campaign's ultimately successful drive to thwart a recount of votes in the disputed Florida election, employing the Big Lie tactic of denouncing Al Gore and the Democrats for the crime—stealing the election—which his party was, in fact, committing.

He set the tone for his subsequent stint as White House press secretary by asserting that Palm Beach County, one of the most heavily Jewish and staunchly Democratic redoubts in Florida, was a "Pat Buchanan stronghold". Fleischer issued this absurd lie in the face of demands for a revote in Palm Beach, where thousands of Gore voters had been misled by an improper ballot to register votes for the Republican right-winger and anti-Semite, Buchanan.

Fleischer really came into his own after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when he served as the Bush White House's first line of defense against any serious probe into the deadliest assault on civilians in US history and defended the Bush administration's inexplicable failure to respond to four simultaneous hijackings or prevent them from occurring in the first place. Fifteen days after the 9/11 attacks, he launched a McCarthyite-style attack on TV personality Bill Maher, then host of the (since canceled) late-night talk show

“Politically Incorrect”. Maher had challenged the characterization of the hijackers as “cowards,” saying that their actions, while abominable, evinced physical and personal courage. What was cowardly, Maher declared, was the US practice of launching cruise missiles against targets thousands of miles away.

Fleischer used his press briefing to directly attack Maher and anyone else who dared to challenge the patriotic and militaristic hysteria that was being whipped up in the aftermath of the World Trade Center tragedy. “They’re reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do” he declared. “This is not a time for remarks like that; there never is.”

Perhaps more than any other single event, this witch-hunting remark set the tone of intimidation and repression that has since become the hallmark of American political life. It was meant, in particular, as a warning shot to the mass media, which meekly complied with the government demand for the suppression of dissenting views and inconvenient facts.

In the run-up to the Iraq war, Fleischer routinely made claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, a Saddam Hussein-Al Qaeda nexus, and mass popular support in Iraq for a US invasion—all of which have since been exposed as crude lies. Giving voice to the gangster mentality that pervades the Bush administration, he replied on October 1, 2002 to a question about the cost of a war to oust Saddam Hussein with an incitement to political assassination: “I can only say that the cost of a one-way ticket is substantially less than that. The cost of one bullet, if the Iraqi people can take it on themselves, is substantially less than that.”

Cover-up of government culpability, if not outright complicity, in 911; white-washing of right-wing/defense establishment links to the anthrax attacks that followed; promotion of propaganda and lies to justify aggressive wars against Afghanistan and Iraq and conceal US war crimes in both countries; defense of policies directing attacking the democratic rights and social conditions of the broad mass of the American people—such is the record of Fleischer in his White House post.

His undisguised contempt for the press and his refusal to answer journalists’ questions provoked grumbling within the White House press corps. However, the reporters, under pressure from their pro-Bush corporate paymasters, kept their misgivings to themselves.

Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, made the following apt characterization of Fleischer and the Bush White House: “They are the most controlling, the most stingy, the most paranoid White House we’ve had in modern times. This is a White House ... that does not seem to believe in the function that the press serves.”

To what extent Fleischer’s decision to leave his post is a symptom of the administration’s political crisis is unclear. The Bush White House is, behind the façade of rigid consensus, a cockpit of palace intrigue and bitterly subjective rivalries. There is, however, little evidence in the public domain of conflict between the press secretary and the Bush inner circle. In the US press commentary on his announcement—predictably banal and, in general, laudatory toward the exiting spokesman—the only hint of friction discovered by this writer was a reference in an Associated Press dispatch to “an uneasy relationship with some senior Bush officials.”

On the other hand, Fleischer’s statement was followed in short order by the resignation announcements of Environmental Protection Agency head Christine Todd Whitman and White House Budget Director Mitchell Daniels. Whitman is a “moderate” by Bush

administration standards, whose generally pro-business and regressive views on environmental policy were considered intolerably liberal by the Republican right. She was known to have come into conflict with the prevailing view in Bush circles that the entire edifice of environmental law should be scrapped and all restrictions on the commercial exploitation—and pollution—of the earth, sea and air be lifted.

It is widely reported that Bush’s political advisers have let it be known that any high-level officials not prepared to stay on for the duration of the 2004 election campaign and beyond must sign off now, lest their leaving give the impression, once the reelection campaign has begun in earnest, of internal discord.

One thing is certain: Fleischer is motivated in leaving his post after 21 years as a government aide by a desire to “enter the private sector” and parlay his notoriety and connections into a large hoard of cash. In doing so, he follows a well-worn path of American “public servants” who left government to cash in, as the saying goes, “big time”—a trend that has grown in tandem with the general rightward trajectory of the political establishment.

The top echelons of the Bush administration are occupied by many such people—including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who served under several Republican presidents and then made a fortune as a drug company executive before assuming his Pentagon post under Bush, and Vice President Dick Cheney, who moved from Defense Secretary under Bush the elder to Chairman and CEO of the oil construction firm Halliburton, where he exploited his personal relations with Middle Eastern oil sheiks to become a multi-millionaire.

It is indicative of the moral level of today’s American political elite that Fleischer has felt no compunction in admitting—no, boasting—that he plans to make use of his government resumé to become very rich. (As White House press secretary he is already taking in a substantial salary of \$140,000). He let it be known that he intends, before obtaining some high-level corporate post, to join the lucrative lecture circuit, which can be milked by prominent Washington insiders to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

Newsweek reporter Martha Brant, noting that former White House press secretaries “can usually turn their public service experience into big private-sector bucks,” provided an indication of what Fleischer can expect to rake in from lecture fees. At some \$25,000 a speech, he could, she calculated, make \$13 million if he managed to speak before all 538 members of Bush’s Pioneer club—the fraternity of corporate CEOs who make top-dollar contributions to Bush’s election campaigns.

Fleischer said he intended to move back to his hometown, but would initially remain in Washington DC to help with the Bush reelection campaign and fatten his bank account. He told the *New York Times* he planned to purchase a home in the Pound Ridge area, but the price tag was presently beyond his means. “That’s one reason I have to stay in Washington for a while,” he told the *Times*.



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