

Ex-Bush spokesman: White House fed war propaganda to a “complicit” media

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29 May 2008

In a stunning blow to what very little remains of the Bush administration’s political credibility, the president’s former press secretary Scott McClellan has published a book indicting the White House for launching an “unnecessary” war in Iraq based on false “propaganda.”

Even more telling, particularly coming from an official who was in charge of dealing with the press, is McClellan’s harsh indictment of the American media as a servile and willing accomplice in this process.

“If anything, the national press corps was probably too deferential to the White House and to the administration in regard to the most important decision facing the nation during my years in Washington, the choice over whether to go to war in Iraq,” he writes. “The collapse of the administration’s rationales for war, which became apparent months after our invasion, should never have come as such a surprise. ... In this case, the ‘liberal media’ didn’t live up to its reputation. If it had, the country would have been better served.”

Significantly, in their main articles on McClellan’s book, neither the *New York Times* nor the *Washington Post*, which together played the most influential roles in selling the war, chose to quote this passage.

Elsewhere, McClellan describes the press as “complicit enablers” in the White House’s “carefully orchestrated campaign to shape and manipulate sources of public approval” in the drive to war. It was guilty, he says, of “spreading distortions, half-truths, and occasionally outright lies.”

There is no indication in what has appeared thus far in the media about the book that it deals at any length with the role of the administration’s other “complicit enablers” in launching the Iraq war—the Democratic Party.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi declared herself in full agreement with McClellan’s critique of the Bush White House and the Iraq war, but this only underscores the bipartisan character of the conspiracy to drag the American people into an imperialist bloodbath.

Pelosi set the tone for the Democrats after their victory in the 2006 congressional elections by immediately ruling out any impeachment hearings or other actions to hold Bush, Cheney and their confederates responsible for the criminal war of aggression that has cost the lives of more than one million Iraqis and more than 4,000 American troops.

Nor will there be the slightest effort by the Democrats now—after the lesser criminal McClellan has provided an inside account of the deliberate fomenting of the war by his bosses—to take action to remove Bush and Cheney or halt the war. On the contrary, McClellan’s book became public within days of the Senate Democrats’ vote to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan not only through the end of Bush’s presidency, but through the first nine months of the next

administration.

While the book, titled *What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington’s Culture of Deception*, is to be published next week, substantial excerpts were reported in the press on Wednesday.

McClellan calls the Iraq war a “serious strategic blunder” and insists that if Bush had had a “crystal ball” and could have foreseen the costs in terms of casualties and destruction, he would not have waged it.

Drawing what he portrays as the principal lesson of this experience, he writes: “What I do know is that war should only be waged when necessary, and the Iraq war was not necessary.”

He makes the same point already made better by many others at the time: that the Bush administration acted in 2002-2003 to preclude any outcome other than a US invasion of Iraq.

It “managed the crisis in a way that almost guaranteed that the use of force would become the only feasible option,” he writes.

McClellan continues: “Over that summer of 2002, top Bush aides had outlined a strategy for carefully orchestrating the coming campaign to aggressively sell the war. . . . In the permanent campaign era, it was all about manipulating sources of public opinion to the president’s advantage.”

While providing further evidence that the administration is guilty of the grave crime of launching a war of aggression based on lies, the former White House spokesman draws back, claiming that he and others who conducted this propaganda campaign were not “employing out and out deception.”

He repeats the theme that the administration was guilty of “downplaying the major reason for going to war,” while promoting the phony pretexts of non-existent Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and terrorist ties. “To this day, the president seems unbothered by the disconnect between the chief rationale for war and the driving motivation behind it.”

But what was this “major reason,” this “driving motivation” in McClellan’s view? He insists that Bush was intent on “realizing his dream for a free Middle East.” This, however, is merely one more fraudulent rationale for a war aimed at utilizing US military force to secure strategic objectives, namely the domination of US capitalism over the oil resources of the Persian Gulf.

McClellan is also harshly critical of the administration’s handling of Hurricane Katrina, which he had staunchly defended in 2005 against reporters, whom he accused of playing “the blame game.”

“One of the worst disasters in our nation’s history became one of the biggest disasters in Bush’s presidency. Katrina and the botched federal response to it would largely come to define Bush’s second term,” he writes in the book. “Many within the White House were in denial about the administration’s responsibility for Katrina...we

largely ignored the fact that the federal government was the vital backup, the fail-safe mechanism supposed to compensate for breakdowns at the lower levels. When you're president, the buck stops with you—a lesson George W. Bush still hadn't fully absorbed."

McClellan begins the book by recounting his 2003 statement to the White House press corps that then-White House aide Lewis "Scooter" Libby and Bush's top political advisor Karl Rove had insisted that "they were not involved" in leaking the name of the CIA operative Valerie Plame to the press as political payback for her husband, former US ambassador Joseph Wilson, having publicly exposed White House lies about the war in Iraq.

This was one of the many lies he told as White House press secretary—he claims that he was duped by Rove, Libby, Cheney and also a supposedly unwitting Bush—but it came back to haunt him. Libby was indicted on perjury and obstruction of justice charges in October 2005 in relation to the CIA leak case and ultimately convicted in March 2007. During the course of these legal proceedings, it was proven that both Rove and Libby were indeed involved in identifying the CIA operative to the press.

"I could feel something fall out of me into the abyss as each reporter took a turn whacking me," McClellan writes of the press briefings after these revelations came to light. He claims that what was at stake was his "reputation," though there is little to suggest that he had much to lose. His performance, however, did contribute to his being pushed out of his position in 2006 by Bush's new chief of staff, Joshua Bolten.

McClellan's problem was that the Plame-Wilson affair was one issue on which the media could summon the courage to go on the offensive, largely because it was being egged on by elements of the national security apparatus, and in particular the CIA, which was angered by the political tactics of the White House.

Much of what McClellan writes merely serves to confirm conclusions already drawn by the bulk of the American people about the war and the nature of the government that launched it. Nonetheless, it is significant from the standpoint of who wrote it.

McClellan is hardly the first White House insider to come out with a tell-all book charging the administration with dragging the American people into war on false pretenses and other crimes. Former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill did so in early 2004, barely a year after being forced out of office. He was followed by Richard Clarke, the administration's former counterterrorism adviser; CIA Director George Tenet; Matthew Dowd, chief strategist for Bush's 2004 campaign; and others.

With McClellan, however, one is dealing with a longtime Bush loyalist, the offspring of a well-connected Texas Republican family who had been with Bush since his days as the state's governor, when he also served as spokesman, a role he continued as traveling press secretary for the Bush-Cheney campaign in 2000. With this book, there is far more the sense of the last rats jumping from a sinking ship, and trying to make some money in the process.

Moreover, the timing of its release cuts across the efforts of the Republican Party to somehow refurbish the image of the Bush administration—which is receiving approval ratings lower than those of Richard Nixon at the height of the Watergate scandal—so that it does not destroy all prospects for McCain and other Republicans in the November elections.

Reaction from the Bush camp was predictably blistering, with many seeming to suggest that after leaving the White House McClellan had either suffered a mental breakdown or had been brainwashed by the

administration's opponents or a left-wing editor.

Former White House chief of staff and Bush's senior political advisor Karl Rove, who comes in for some of the harshest criticism in the book, suggested that McClellan didn't even write it.

"First of all, this doesn't sound like Scott. It really doesn't," Rove said on Fox News. "Not the Scott McClellan I've known for a long time. Second of all, it sounds like somebody else. It sounds like a left-wing blogger."

Current White House press secretary Dana Perino issued a statement reacting to the reports on the book: "Scott, we now know, is disgruntled about his experience at the White House. For those of us who fully supported him, before, during and after he was press secretary, we are puzzled. It is sad—this is not the Scott we knew."

Meanwhile, McClellan's predecessor as press secretary, Ari Fleischer, described him as an "always reliable, solid deputy" when he was at the White House. He added that "not once did Scott approach me—privately or publicly—to discuss any misgivings he had about the war in Iraq or the manner in which the White House made the case for war."

Indeed, McClellan spent three years at the podium in the White House press room, lying to the American public not only about the Iraq war, but also about torture, extraordinary rendition, domestic spying and other crimes carried out by the administration which he served.

He was a loyal, though thoroughly unconvincing, defender of the Bush White House line who sought to overcome his intellectual and rhetorical limitations in jousting with the press corps by doggedly repeating the same lies over and over again. In contrast to his predecessor, the unctuous Fleischer, and his successor, the right-wing radio talk show host Tony Snow, McClellan often left the impression of a deer caught in the headlights.

As Michael Wolff, who profiled McClellan for *Vanity Fair*, wrote, McClellan's appointment demonstrated "a certain amount of contempt for the press on the part of the White House . . . It was a comedy, a farce, actually. He could not do the job, bottom line. He came out every day and he couldn't talk through a sentence."

Many of the administration's right-wing supporters, who previously defended McClellan against his critics, are now highlighting these competence issues in an attempt to discredit him and his book.

From the excerpts that have appeared thus far, McClellan's book is a hackneyed and self-serving account of his tenure in the White House, which hardly makes a coherent critique of the Bush administration and indeed claims that Bush himself was a victim of unscrupulous advisors.

Nonetheless, to the extent that it further substantiates the way in which the administration lied to the American people in order to launch an unprovoked war that has claimed over one million lives, it provides one more bit of evidence for bringing those responsible for this crime to account.



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