

Bush Rewrites History To Criticize His Antiwar Critics

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The Nation -- In a Veterans Day speech on Friday, delivered to troops and others at the Tobyhanna Army Depot in Pennsylvania, George W. Bush veered from the usual commemoration of sacrifice to strike at critics who have questioned whether he steered the country into war by using false information. This has become a tough and troubling issue for his presidency. A poll taken before his speech found that 57 percent of the respondents now believe that Bush "deliberately misled" the nation into war. That is astounding and, I assume, without precedent in history. Has there been another wartime period during which a majority of Americans believed the president had purposefully bamboozled them about the reasons for that war? Addressing this charge is tough for Bush because it calls more attention to it, and the on-ground-realities in Iraq only cause more popular unease with the war. But Bush and his aides calculated that it was better to punch back than ignore the criticism, and that's a sign that they're worried that Bush is coming to be defined as a president who conned the nation into an ugly war. So Bush tried. Let's break down his effort:

Our debate at home must also be fair-minded. One of the hallmarks of a free society and what makes our country strong is that our political leaders can discuss their differences openly, even in times of war.

Conservative who claim raising questions about the war does a disservice to the troops and is anti-American might want to keep these words in mind.

When I made the decision to remove Saddam Hussein from power, Congress approved it with strong bipartisan support.

Actually, Congress did not approve Bush's decision to remove Saddam. In October 2002, the House and Senate approved a resolution that gave Bush the authority to go to war in Iraq if he deemed that appropriate. At the time, Bush and his aides were claiming it was their goal to force Saddam Hussein to give up his weapons of mass destruction and his WMD programs (which, we know now, did not exist). When the resolution passed---and in the weeks after---the White House insisted that Bush was not bent on "regime change" and that he was willing to work within the UN to force Saddam to accept UN inspectors (which Saddam did) in pursuit of the goal of disarming Iraq. Is Bush now saying that he had already resolved to invade Iraq at this point and all his talk about achieving disarmament through the UN process was bunk? Is he rewriting history--or telling us the real truth? In any event, when Bush did order the invasion of Iraq months later in March 2003, he did not ask Congress to vote on his decision to remove Saddam.

I also recognize that some of our fellow citizens and elected officials didn't support the liberation of Iraq. And that is their right, and I respect it. As President and Commander-in-Chief, I accept the responsibilities, and the criticisms, and the consequences that come with such a solemn decision.

Bush might accept "the responsibilities and criticisms," but has yet to acknowledge the mistakes he and his aides made before and after the invasion about planning for a post-invasion Iraq. He also has not insisted on any accountability for these mistakes. For instance, he gave a spiffy medal to former CIA chief George Tenet, who was responsible for the prewar intelligence failure.

While it's perfectly legitimate to criticize my decision or the conduct of the war, it is deeply irresponsible to rewrite the history of how that war began.

When was the last time Bush talked about how the war began--that is, when did he mention that his primary reason for war (protecting the American public from the supposed WMD threat posed by Saddam Hussein) was discredited by reality? Is ignoring history the same as rewriting it?

Some Democrats and anti-war critics are now claiming we manipulated the intelligence and misled the American people about why we went to war. These critics are fully aware that a bipartisan Senate investigation found no evidence of political pressure to change the intelligence community's judgments related to Iraq's weapons programs.

This is not the full and accurate explanation of the controversy at hand. The issue of whether the Bush administration misled the nation in the run-up to the war has two components. The first is the production of the intelligence related to WMDs and the supposed al Qaeda-Sadam connection. The second is how the Bush crowd represented the intelligence to the public when trying to make the case for war. As for the first, the Senate intelligence committee report did say the committee had found no evidence of political pressure. But Democratic members of the committee and others challenged this finding. Several committee Democrats pointed to a CIA independent review on the prewar intelligence, conducted by a panel led by Richard Kerr, former deputy director of the CIA, which said,

Requests for reporting and analysis of [Iraq's links to al Qaeda] were steady and heavy in the period leading up to the war, creating significant pressure on the Intelligence Community to find evidence that supported a connection.

More to the point, Kerr told Vanity Fair that intelligence analysts did feel pressured by the go-to-war gang. The magazine in May 2004 reported,

"There was a lot of pressure, no question," says Kerr. "The White House, State, Defense were raising questions, heavily on W.M.D. and the issue of terrorism. Why did you select this information rather than that? Why have you downplayed this particular thing?...Sure, I heard that some of the analysts felt pressure. We heard about it from friends. There are always some people in the agency who will say, 'We've been pushed to hard.' Analysts will say, 'You're trying to politicize it.' There were people who felt there was too much pressure. Not that they were being asked to change their judgments, but there were being asked again and again to restate their judgments--do another paper on this, repetitive pressures. Do it again."

Was it a case, then, of officials repeatedly asking for another paper until they got the answer they wanted? "There may have been some of that," Kerr concedes. The requests came from "primarily people outside asking for the same paper again and again. There was a lot of repetitive tasking. Some of the analysts felt this was unnecessary pressure. The repetitive requests, Kerr made clear, came from the C.I.A.'s "senior customers," including "the White House, the vice president, State, Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff."

Despite Bush's assertion, the question remains whether undue pressure was applied by the White House. And in his Veterans Day speech, Bush ducked the second issue: how he and his aides depicted the intelligence. This is the source of the dispute over the so-called Phase II investigation of the Senate intelligence committee. The allegation is that Bush and administration officials overstated and hyped the flawed intelligence and claimed it was definitive when they had reason to know it was not.

For example, in his final speech to the nation before launching the war, Bush claimed that US intelligence left "no doubt" about Iraq's supposed WMDs. But there was plenty of doubt on critical issues. Intelligence analysts at the Energy Department and State Department disagreed with those at the CIA about the evidence that purportedly showed Iraq had revived its nuclear weapons program: its importation of aluminum tubes and the allegation that Iraq had been uranium-shopping in Niger. (In 2002, Dick Cheney said the tubes were "irrefutable evidence," and Condoleezza Rice said they were "only really suited for nuclear weapons programs." But a year earlier, as The New York Times reported in 2004, "Rice's staff had been told that the government's foremost nuclear expert seriously doubted that the tubes were for nuclear weapons.") The CIA believed Iraq had chemical weapons. But the Defense Intelligence Agency reported that there was no evidence such stockpiles existed. Some intelligence analysts concluded that Iraq was developing unmanned aerial vehicles that could deliver chemical or biological weapons. The experts on UAVs at the Air Force thought this was not so. Was Bush speaking accurately when he told the public--and the world--there was "no doubt"?

Also, did Bush make specific claims unsupported by the intelligence? The National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq, produced in October 2002, maintained that Iraq had an active biological research and development program. Bush publicly said Iraq had "stockpiles" of biological weapons. There is a difference between an R&D program (which Iraq did not have) and warehouses loaded with ready-to-go weapons (which Bush implied existed). How did an R&D program become stockpiles? This is as intriguing a question as how those sixteen words about Iraq's alleged pursuit of uranium in Africa became embedded in the State of the Union speech Bush delivered in early 2003.

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On the key issue of Saddam Hussein's alleged connection to al Qaeda, Bush also made statements that went beyond the intelligence. This link was crucial to the case for war, for Bush and other hawks were arguing that Saddam Hussein could slip

his WMDs to his pal Osama bin Laden. Bush claimed that Saddam Hussein was "dealing with" al Qaeda. But his intelligence agencies had not reached that conclusion. (And the 9/11 Commission later said there was no evidence of collusion between al Qaeda and Saddam.) So how did Bush come to make such a statement? Recently, Senator Carl Levin, a Democrat, released formerly classified material showing that before the war when Bush, Cheney, Colin Powell and other administration officials cited evidence that Iraq had been training al Qaeda operatives in the use of bombs and other weapons, Bush and these officials were relying on the statements of a captured al Qaeda member whose claims had been discounted by the Defense Intelligence Agency. Once more, how had Bush and his senior aides come to disseminate specific and provocative information deemed unreliable by the intelligence community?

Bush's Veterans Days comments addressed none of this.

They also know that intelligence agencies from around the world agreed with our assessment of Saddam Hussein.

The people with the most hands-on information regarding WMDs in Iraq did not. The International Atomic Energy Agency, led by recent Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohamed ElBaradei, concluded weeks before the war (after their inspectors had returned to Iraq) that Saddam Hussein had not revived the nuclear weapons program that the IAEA had dismantled in the mid-1990s. And Hans Blix, head of the UN inspectors in Iraq, repeatedly said that his team was not finding evidence of chemical or biological weapons stockpiles.

...And many of these critics supported my opponent during the last election, who explained his position to support the resolution in the Congress this way: "When I vote to give the President of the United States the authority to use force, if necessary, to disarm Saddam Hussein, it is because I believe that a deadly arsenal of weapons of mass destruction in his hands is a threat, and a grave threat, to our security." That's why more than a hundred Democrats in the House and the Senate--who had access to the same intelligence--voted to support removing Saddam Hussein from power.

As noted above, the Democrats voted to give Bush the authority to use force when he thought he should--but only after Bush had promised to go to the United Nations in an effort to disarm Saddam Hussein, who, it turned out, was telling the truth when he denied his government possessed WMDs. Even the John Kerry quote that Bush cites contains the to-disarm condition. And several Democratic members of Congress have claimed that they did not see all the intelligence that was available to the White House.

The stakes in the global war on terror are too high, and the national interest is too important, for politicians to throw out false charges.

It's hard to argue with that.

These baseless attacks send the wrong signal to our troops and to an enemy that is questioning America's will. As our troops fight a ruthless enemy determined to destroy our way of life, they deserve to know that their elected leaders who voted to send them to war continue to stand behind them. Our troops deserve to know that this support will remain firm when the going gets tough.

Who said that "it's perfectly legitimate to criticize" the "decision [to go to war in Iraq] or the conduct of the war"? That was Bush, moments earlier, in the same speech. So which is it? Is it okay to criticize the conduct of the war or not?

By the way, while accusing his critics of falsifying history, Bush never conceded that he launched the war on a false premise--that Saddam Hussein was up to his neck in WMDs--and, thus, as he paid tribute to veterans of this war and others, he did not accept responsibility for sending American troops into battle for a cause that did not exist.

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