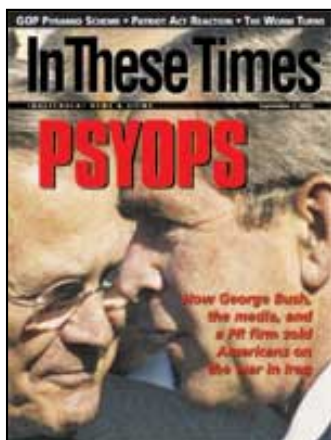


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Web of Lies

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Now that the invasion of Iraq is a *fait accompli*, the mainstream U.S. news media are finally giving significant attention to the weaknesses in the Bush administration's case for the war. Of the many distortions that could be targeted, the media have focused primarily on the "16 words" in the president's January 2003 State of the Union address—the sentence that repeated the now-discredited claim that Iraq attempted to buy uranium from Niger to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program. In looking for whom to blame for deceiving the American people about Iraq's weapons (the CIA, the White House staff, the vice president, the president), the news media have left out one key player in the deceptions: themselves.



"It's all a web of lies," Colin Powell told the United Nations on February 5.

News organizations encourage journalists to gather news from the most "authoritative sources." To the public, the phrase may sound interchangeable with "reliable experts." Yet in practice it means turning to those in the highest positions of power or their designated spokespeople. In the coverage of the buildup to the war in Iraq, that meant relying primarily on the president and his press secretary, the vice president, the secretaries of state and defense, the national security adviser, and other "official sources," including congressional leaders.

When Rumsfeld and Powell disagreed over how to proceed with Iraq, the news media covered the debate. *Newsweek*, for example, pictured them side-by-side for a September 16, 2002 cover story on "The War Over War." Yet when these officials moved into sync with each other, the authority-conscious news media mostly reflected that consensus. Even when millions protested the impending war, relatively little attention was given to the arguments supporting dissent.

There are many reasons why journalists seek out authorities for news, rather than interviewing experts and participants or reviewing documents. One such reason is convenience. Authorities take great care to dispense information to journalists in a form that fits easily into news stories. High public officials also enjoy a presumption of veracity that more ordinary sources do not—which means, as a practical matter, a reporter does not need to verify official statements as rigorously as he or she would those of lesser mortals.

Many other benefits accrue to news organizations whose reporters do not stray too far from official agendas. They can be assured of regular "access" to authorities and to "inside scoops." They can protect themselves against criticism that they are "biased" or "unpatriotic." They can avoid offending and thereby losing audiences, whose attention they sell to advertisers (the major source of media revenues). They can advance their own interests with respect to lobbying for favorable government policies toward media corporations or acquiring government contracts for their non-media businesses. (General Electric, for example—whose roster of companies includes NBC, MSNBC, and CNBC—is a major military contractor). Finally, life is just easier for journalists and their parent corporations when they parrot official views in their reports. They are less likely to be attacked by the powerful.

Naturally, there are also good and responsible reasons to pay attention to authoritative sources. Authorities often have access to volumes of information not easily available elsewhere. Moreover, since authorities have the power to act in the name of the country,

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monitoring their thoughts and plans is an important part of being a watchdog for the people.

A real danger to a democracy comes, however, when journalists rely primarily or exclusively on official sources. Those in the highest positions of authority are often ignorant about things known by less authoritative but more knowledgeable experts. Additionally, officials often strategically withhold and release information to suit their own agendas, trying to shape the amount and type of attention a story will get. (Check out the Saturday newspaper for stories authorities release on Friday hoping they will be "old news" by Monday.) Most significantly, authorities often lie about what they do know. Historically, U.S. administrations have decided on the military actions they wanted to take, and then invented the stories that the Congress and the public needed to believe to support the actions. This seems to have been the case with the recent invasion of Iraq.

For all their supposed watchdog instincts, journalists virtually never report an official story and then add "but the State Department [or the Pentagon or the president] has always lied about such things in the past." To do so would be to undermine the news media's credibility as well, since it would tacitly admit their past complicity.

On some level, the U.S. news media still understand they have a duty to uphold the truth, as was made clear by the *New York Times*' soul-searching dismissal of reporter Jayson Blair. His mistake, however, was not simply that he published stories with false information in them, but that he cut out the middleman. That is, instead of doing what many of his still-esteemed colleagues routinely do—publishing misinformation passed on to them by named and unnamed authoritative sources—Blair made up the phony information himself.

The official statements reproduced below were given extensive coverage and largely shaped public perceptions about Iraq. As the "corrections" that follow indicate, some reporters made honest efforts to assess the claims of authorities. Indeed, isolated reports discredited every major official claim about Iraq before the war. Rather than simply echoing authorities, these enterprising reporters requested documents, spoke to experts, or compared officials' claims about WMD locations with what U.N. inspectors found when they went to the sites. Even the ultraconservative *Washington Times* published a major challenge to President Bush's credibility, though the editors buried it on page 16. Yet much more attention was given to the distorted official claims than to the corrections, and no mainstream news organization gave pre-war attention to the overall pattern of deception about Iraq, a pattern that stretches back to prior administrations.

President Bush, at a Camp David press conference, September 7, 2002, citing a report that stated Iraq was six months away from developing a nuclear weapon: "I don't know what more evidence we need."

Joseph Curl, *Washington Times*, September 27, 2002: "The International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] says that a report cited by President Bush as evidence that Iraq ... was 'six months away' from developing a nuclear weapon does not exist. ... 'There are no indications that there remains in Iraq any physical capability for the production of weapon-usable nuclear material of any practical significance,' IAEA Director-General Mohammed Elbaradei wrote in a report to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan."

Bush, *Cincinnati address*, October 7, 2002: "Iraq possesses ballistic missiles with a likely range of hundreds of miles—far enough to strike Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey and other nations—in a region where more than 135,000 American civilians and service members live and work."

Walter Pincus and Dana Milbank, *Washington Post*, March 18: "Inspectors have found that the Al Samoud-2 missiles can travel less than 200 miles—not far enough to hit the targets Bush named. Iraq has not accounted for 14 medium-range Scud missiles from the 1991 Persian Gulf War, but the administration has not presented any evidence that they still exist."

Colin Powell, at the U.N. Security Council, February 5: "Saddam Hussein has never accounted for vast amounts of chemical weaponry."

Richard Wolffe and Daniel Klaidman, *Newsweek*, February 17: "U.N. inspectors said they verified the destruction of almost all Iraqi chemical weapons and ingredients after [1991's] Operation Desert Storm. By now, any leftover supplies would have degraded beyond use."

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Bush, *Cincinnati address, October 7, 2002*: "Satellite photographs reveal that Iraq his rebuilding facilities at sites that have been part of his nuclear program in the past."

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Mark Phillips, *CBSNews.com, February 20*: "When the U.N. went into the new buildings they found 'nothing.'"

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Powell, *at the U.N. Security Council, February 5*: "We have firsthand descriptions of biological weapons factories on wheels and rails. The trucks and train cars are easily moved and are designed to avoid detection by inspectors."

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Richard Wolffe and Daniel Klaidman, *Newsweek, February 17, 2003*: "Biowar experts ... say truck-mounted labs would be all but unworkable. The required ventilation systems would make them instantly recognizable from above. ... And U.S. intelligence, after years of looking for them, has never found even one."

Powell, *at the U.N. Security Council, February 5*: "Saddam Hussein is determined to get his hands on a nuclear bomb ... so determined that he has made repeated attempts to acquire high specification aluminum tubes from 11 different countries."

Mark Phillips, *CBSNews.com, February 20*: "U.N. sources have told CBS News that American tips have led to one dead end after another. ... Example: Interviews with scientists about the aluminum tubes the U.S. says Iraq has imported for enriching uranium, but which the Iraqis say are for making rockets. Given the size and specification of the tubes, the U.N. calls the 'Iraqi alibi air tight.'"

Bush, *at a press conference, November 7, 2002*: "[Saddam] is a threat. ... He's a threat because he is dealing with al-Qaeda."

Powell, *at the UN Security Council, February 5*: "Iraq is harboring [Abu Mousab] Zarqawi and his subordinates. ... We also know that Zarqawi's colleagues have been active in ... Chechnya, Russia."

James Risen and David Johnston, *New York Times, February 2, 2003*: "At the Federal Bureau of Investigation, some investigators said they were baffled by the Bush administration's insistence on a solid link between Iraq and Osama bin Laden's network. 'We've been looking at this hard for more than a year and you know what, we just don't think it's there,' a government official said."

Bruce Crumley, *Time, March 3, 2003*: "'When we heard Powell citing our Chechen network suspects as the terror link directly to Zarqawi, everyone's mouth dropped open,' says a French investigator—who calls Powell's Iraq-al-Qaeda link 'unconvincing at best.'"

Bush, *State of the Union Address, January 28*: "The British government has learned that Iraq has recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa."

David Ensor, *CNN.com, March 14*: "[The uranium] intelligence documents ... have been dismissed as forgeries by U.N. weapons inspectors."

Walter Pincus and Dana Milbank, *Washington Post, March 18*: "[T]op CIA officials had significant doubts about the veracity of the evidence, linking Iraq to efforts to purchase uranium for nuclear weapons from Niger, but the information ended up as fact in Bush's State of the Union address."

Powell, *at the UN Security Council, February 5*: "Saddam Hussein forced out the last inspectors in 1998."

James Foley, *State Department spokesman, January 7, 1999*: "The United States did not

work with anyone at UNSCOM to collect information specifically for the purpose of undermining the Iraqi regime.”

After President Clinton dismissed Hussein’s claims that UNSCOM inspectors had been infiltrated by CIA spies, UNSCOM withdrew all personnel in anticipation of the U.S. and Britain’s December 1998 bombing of Iraq for its “defiance.” Yet, in early January 1999, after the bombing was over, **Colum Lynch** of the *Boston Globe*, **Barton Gellman** of the *Washington Post*, and **Tim Weiner** of the *New York Times* confirmed that the UNSCOM teams had been infiltrated by U.S. spies. As Gellman reported on January 6, “Annan is convinced that Washington used the operation to penetrate the security apparatus protecting Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.”

The most widely reported stories about Iraq followed conventions of journalistic objectivity. They were true in a narrow, technical sense: The cited officials really did make those claims. Yet, the country went to war based on a web of lies. The most accurate reports were those that employed what scientists view as objectivity: testing claims and accepting only those that survive scrutiny. A fully functioning democracy requires news media that practice the latter form of objective reporting and give the resulting stories the prominence they deserve before major policy decisions are implemented. In the meantime, the public would be wise to pay closer attention to the stories behind the blaring headlines in order to benefit from the reporting of those journalists in the mainstream who are trying to alert the public to the truth. ■

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Just goes to show you that you gotta go out and educate yourself. none of this relying on the government.

Posted by: Jon on 8.11.03 | 8:34 pm from Texas

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