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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## Threats, Promises and Lies

By PAUL KRUGMAN

**S**o it seems that Turkey wasn't really haggling about the price, it just wouldn't accept payment by check or credit card. In return for support of an Iraq invasion, Turkey wanted — and got — immediate aid, cash on the barrelhead, rather than mere assurances about future help. You'd almost think President Bush had a credibility problem.

And he does.

The funny thing is that this administration sets great store by credibility. As the justifications for invading Iraq come and go — Saddam is developing nuclear weapons; no, but he's in league with Osama; no, but he's really evil — the case for war has come increasingly to rest on credibility. You see, say the hawks, we've already put our soldiers in position, so we must attack or the world won't take us seriously.

But credibility isn't just about punishing people who cross you. It's also about honoring promises, and telling the truth. And those are areas where the Bush administration has problems.

Consider the astonishing fact that Vicente Fox, president of Mexico, appears unwilling to cast his U.N. Security Council vote in America's favor. Given Mexico's close economic ties to the United States, and Mr. Fox's onetime personal relationship with Mr. Bush, Mexico should have been more or less automatically in America's column. But the Mexican president feels betrayed. He took the politically risky step of aligning himself closely with Mr. Bush — a boost to Republican efforts to woo Hispanic voters — in return for promised reforms that would legalize the status of undocumented immigrants. The administration never acted on those reforms, and Mr. Fox is in no mood to do Mr. Bush any more favors.

Mr. Fox is not alone. In fact, I can't think of anyone other than the hard right and corporate lobbyists who has done a deal with Mr. Bush and not come away feeling betrayed. New York's elected representatives stood side by side with him a few days after Sept. 11 in return for a promise of generous aid. A few months later, as they started to question the administration's commitment, the budget director, Mitch Daniels, accused them of "money-grubbing games." Firefighters and policemen applauded Mr. Bush's promise, more than a year ago, of \$3.5 billion for "first responders"; so far, not a penny has been delivered.

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These days, whenever Mr. Bush makes a promise — like his new program to fight AIDS in Africa — experienced Bushologists ask, "O.K., that's the bait, where's the switch?" (Answer: Much of the money will be diverted from other aid programs, such as malaria control.)

Then there's the honesty thing.

Mr. Bush's mendacity on economic matters was obvious even during the 2000 election. But lately it has reached almost pathological levels. Last week Mr. Bush — who has been having a hard time getting reputable economists to endorse his economic plan — claimed an endorsement from the latest Blue Chip survey of business economists. "I don't know what he was citing," declared the puzzled author of that report, which said no such thing.

What Americans may not fully appreciate is the extent to which similarly unfounded claims have, in the eyes of much of the world, discredited the administration's foreign policy. Whatever the real merits of the case against Iraq, again and again the administration has cited evidence that turns out to be misleading or worthless — "garbage after garbage after garbage," according to one U.N. official.

Despite his decline in the polls, Mr. Bush hasn't fully exhausted his reservoir of trust in this country. People still remember the stirring image of the president standing amid the rubble of the World Trade Center, his arm around a fireman's shoulders — and our ever-deferential, protective media haven't said much about the broken promises that followed. But the rest of the world simply doesn't trust Mr. Bush either to honor his promises or to tell the truth.

Can we run a foreign policy in the absence of trust? The administration apparently thinks it can use threats as a substitute. Officials have said that they expect undecided Security Council members to come around out of fear of being on the "wrong" side. And Mr. Bush may yet get the U.N. to acquiesce, grudgingly, in his war.

But even if he does, we shouldn't delude ourselves: whatever credibility we may gain by invading Iraq is small recompense for the trust we have lost around the world.

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