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Commentary > Dante Chinni
from the June 24, 2003 edition

Bush credibility gap - a slow, quiet crumble

By Dante Chinni

WASHINGTON – President Bush is not really an "issue guy." He never has been and probably never will be. As CEO of America Inc. - an image he likes to sell - he isn't one to get bogged down in minutiae. He's content to let an army of wonks go about their wonkery while he sits in the big office and oversees the big picture.

And for 2-1/2 years this model had served him well. People don't necessarily trust that George W. Bush knows and understands the workings of the EPA or the FCC or the Treasury, but they trust him to oversee it all fairly and honestly. This was, in fact, one of the primary reasons he won the presidency in the first place, in that unbelievably close election in 2000.

Many voters thought that former Vice President Al Gore, a member of troubled administration, had trouble telling the truth. Mr. Gore might have been more experienced and more knowledgeable about the workings of government, but Mr. Bush resonated with people as a down-to-earth guy they could trust.

In the past few weeks some questions have begun to arise about just how candid this White House is being in a variety of areas. The accusations aren't really of lying, per se, but rather they center on this administration's ability to give people the entire truth, the full picture of reality. Slowly and quietly, a credibility gap is opening, and this White House needs to be careful. If not, the gap may open wide enough to swallow up Bush's high poll numbers.

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The highest-profile case concerns Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Not long ago these weapons were called the principal reason the United States went to war. Now, as days go by without any revelatory discoveries in Iraq, even members of the administration are backing away from talk of their existence.

Congress has begun closed-door hearings into whether the intelligence given to the White House was shaded to let the administration hear what it wanted. Last week, at a Monitor breakfast, former Congressman Lee Hamilton, himself once chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said the intelligence reports he saw were almost always ambiguous and in this case the intelligence gathered was "probably used selectively." The question, of course, is by whom and at what level of command.

In the area of tax cuts, one of the president's favorites, the \$350 billion cut designed to bring relief to "everyone who pays income taxes," will in fact give cuts to the vast majority of Americans - if not actually all of them.

But according to an analysis by Citizens for Tax Justice, the plan will give half of all taxpayers a cut of less than \$100. That may be "tax relief," but if most Americans knew how little "relief" they were going to be in line for, it's hardly likely they would have backed this sweeping set of cuts.

And last week, The New York Times reported that a soon-to-be-released environmental report from the EPA was edited by the White House so that an entire section on global warming is whittled down to just a few paragraphs. The White House struck sections about the possible human effects on global warming and a study that showed sharp increases in temperature over the past decade. They, instead, added a reference to a study funded in part by the American Petroleum Institute that questioned those findings.

The report was not some leftover effort from the Clinton administration - it was put together by Bush's own EPA to offer a picture of the state of the environment.

It's easy to discount these problems as little bumps in the road for the president. As 2004 nears, his approval numbers are in the 60s, as people continue to put faith in him as governmental CEO, and assume that every politician stretches the truth now and again. But there's a saying in journalism. "One is an event. Two is a coincidence. Three is a trend." And this trend could be particularly troubling for the president.





Bush's support doesn't come from his positions; it comes from something more personal. People like him in large part because they believe he's being straight with them. If that changes, his ride toward reelection may have more than a few twists and turns.



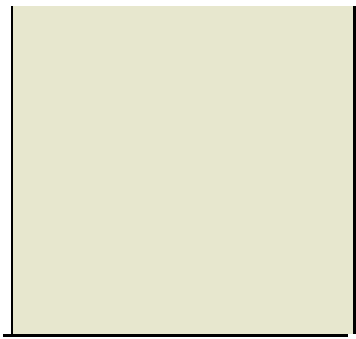
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