



Capital Games by DAVID CORN

MIA WMDs--For Bush, It's a Joke

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Only in Washington.

Last night I was at the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association Dinner. It's a formal-and-fun affair where thousands of media folks assemble at the Hilton for a fancy dinner and fab pre- and post-parties. I'm not going to denigrate such soirees. I enjoy them. While bookers and producers jiggled and jostled on the dance floor and media and political celebs dissected the news du jour (this time it was Richard Clarke's dramatic appearance before the 9/11 commission), I was able to chat with former weapons hunter David Kay and learn about some troubling developments in the intelligence community (more on that down the road). And there was free sushi.

But an awful you're-all-alone moment came during George W. Bush's comments that followed the sit-down dinner. The current president is often the honored guest at this annual affair, and the audience toasts him in what is supposed to be a sign of communal and nonpartisan spirit. And, the tradition is, that the president has to be funny; he has to provide us with an amusing speech that pokes fun at himself and his political foes. After all, political journalists love to see politicians engage in self-deprecating humor. Bill Clinton was quite good at these performances. Bush seems to enjoy them less. Rather than do straight standup, he sometimes relies on a humorous slide show, and that was how he chose to entertain the media through this time.

It's standard fare humor. Bush says he is preparing for a tough election fight; then on the large video screens a picture flashes showing him wearing a boxing robe while sitting at his desk. Bush notes he spends "a lot of time on the phone listening to our European allies." Then we see a photo of him on the phone with a finger in his ear. There were funny bits about *Skull and Bones*, his mother, and Dick

Washington--a city of denials, spin, and political calculations.

They may speak English there,

but most citizens still need an interpreter to understand its ways and meanings. David Corn, the Washington editor of *The Nation* magazine, has spent years analyzing the policies and pursuing the lies that spew out of the nation's capital. He is a novelist, biographer, and television and radio commentator who is able to both decipher and scrutinize Washington.

In his dispatches, he takes on the day-by-day political and policy battles under way in the Capitol, the White House, the think tanks, and the television studios. With an informed, unconventional perspective, he holds the politicians, policymakers and pundits accountable and reports the important facts and views that go uncovered elsewhere.

Check out David Corn's new bestselling book, *The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception* (Crown Publishers). For information, visit www.bushlies.com.



Cheney. But at one point, Bush showed a photo of himself looking for something out a window in the Oval Office, and he said, "Those weapons of mass destruction have got to be somewhere."

The audience laughed. I grimaced. But that wasn't the end of it. After a few more slides, there was a shot of Bush looking under furniture in the Oval Office. "Nope," he said. "No weapons over there." More laughter. Then another picture of Bush searching in his office: "Maybe under here." Laughter again.

Disapproval must have registered upon my face, for one of my tablemates said, "Come on, David, this is funny." I wanted to reply, *Over 500 Americans and literally countless Iraqis are dead because of a war that was supposedly fought to find weapons of mass destruction, and Bush is joking about it.* Instead, I took a long drink of the lovely white wine that had come with our dinner. It's not as if I was in the middle of a talk-show debate and *had* to respond. This was certainly one of those occasions in which you either get it or don't. And I wasn't getting it. Or maybe my neighbor wasn't.

At the end of the slide show, Bush displayed two pictures of himself with troops and noted these were his favorites. The final photograph was a shot of special forces soldiers--with their faces blurred to protect their identities--who were posing in Afghanistan where they had buried a piece of 9/11 debris in a spot that had once been an al Qaeda camp. Bush spoke about the prayer the commander had said during the burial ceremony and noted he had this photograph hanging in his private study.

So what's wrong with this picture? Bush was somber about the sacrifice being made by U.S. troops overseas. But he obviously considered it fine to make fun of the reason he cited for sending Americans to war and to death. What an act of audacious spin. One poll recently showed that most Americans believe he either lied about Iraq's WMDs or deliberately exaggerated the case to justify the war. And it is undeniable that in seeking public support for the war he made many false assertions that went beyond quoting intelligence that turned out to be wrong. (I've written about this in many other places. If you still don't believe Bush mugged the truth, check out this [short guide](#).) As the crowd was digesting the delicious surf-and-turf meal, Bush was transforming serious scandal into rim-shot comedy.

Few seemed to mind. His WMD gags did not prompt a how-can-you silence from the gathering. At the after-parties, I heard no complaints. Was I being too

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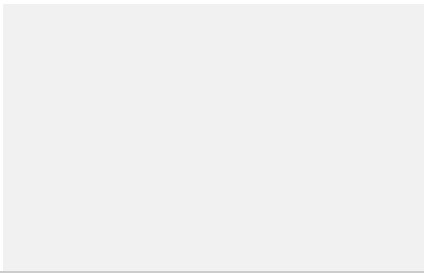
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sensitive? I wondered what the spouse, child or parent of a soldier killed in Iraq would have felt if they had been watching C-SPAN and saw the commander-in-chief mocking the supposed justification for the war that claimed their loved ones. Bush told the nation that lives had to be sacrificed because Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction that could be used (by terrorists) against the United States. That was not true. (And as Kay pointed out, the evidence so far shows these weapons were not there in the first place, not that they were hidden, destroyed or spirited away.) But rather than acknowledge he misinformed the public, Bush jokes about the absence of such weapons.

Even if Bush does not believe he lied to or misled the public, how can he make fun of the rationale for a war that has killed and maimed thousands? Imagine if Lyndon Johnson had joked about the trumped-up Gulf of Tonkin incident that he deceitfully used as a rationale for U.S. military action in Vietnam: "Who knew that fish had torpedoes?" Or if Ronald Reagan appeared at a correspondents event following the truck-bombing at the Marines barracks in Beirut--which killed over 200 American servicemen--and said, "Guess we forgot to put in a stop light." Or if Clinton had come out after the bombing of Serbia--during which U.S. bombs errantly destroyed the Chinese embassy and killed several people there--and said, "The problem is, those embassies--they all look alike."

Yet there was Bush--apparently having a laugh at his own expense, but actually doing so on the graves of thousands. This was a callous and arrogant display. For Bush, the misinformation--or disinformation--he peddled before the war was no more than material for yucks. As the audience laughed along, he smiled. The false statements (or lies) that had launched a war had become merely another punchline in the nation's capital.

DON'T FORGET ABOUT DAVID CORN'S BOOK, [*The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception*](#) (Crown Publishers). A *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER! *The Library Journal* says, "Corn chronicles to devastating effect the lies, falsehoods, and misrepresentations....Corn has painstakingly unearthed a bill of particulars against the president that is as damaging as it is thorough." For more information and a sample, check out the book's official website: www.bushlies.com.



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Willful Ignorance

David Corn, Washington editor of [The Nation](#), is the author of [The Lies of George W. Bush: Mastering the Politics of Deception](#) (Crown Publishers).

A year ago—March 17, 2003, to be exact—George W. Bush addressed the nation and the world. He gave Saddam Hussein 48 hours to get out town or face a U.S. military invasion. To defend the war to come, Bush declared, "Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraqi regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised." There was nothing ambiguous here: "leaves no doubt". Of all the false assertions—or lies—that Bush told before the war, this one was perhaps the most important, for Bush was informing Americans, citizens elsewhere, members of the U.S. armed forces about to be placed in harm's way and Iraqis who also would pay the ultimate price that his actions, as controversial as they might be, were based on rock-solid, you-can-take-it-to-the-bank information. In essence, Bush was saying we know what we are doing and we know it is absolutely unavoidable.

That was not true. The issue is not merely that Bush apparently spoke falsely when he said that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and that Saddam Hussein was in cahoots with Al Qaeda. Good-faith mistakes based on incomplete intelligence can happen. But that is not what occurred in this instance. Before the war, Bush claimed he was proceeding with total certainty based on intelligence that was 100 percent reliable and utterly conclusive. He did not say that due to the available intelligence he suspected Hussein possessed WMDs, that he worried Iraq was seeking weapons of mass destruction, that he believed he could not allow the possibility Hussein might develop and amass WMD stockpiles. He maintained that the basis for this elective war—Hussein's WMDs—was undeniable.

But it is now undeniable that the intelligence was not as absolute as Bush had claimed. Portions of the October 2002 National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq—the summation of the intelligence community's reporting on Iraq—were declassified last year. Various government officials have conducted post-invasion reviews of the prewar intelligence. And CIA director George Tenet, trying to defend his agency in public speeches and congressional testimony, has in recent weeks described the prewar intelligence. All of this provides indisputable evidence that Bush misled the public as to the intelligence on Iraq's WMDs.

Let's look at what the experts have said. Last fall David Kay, when he was still the chief WMD hunter, testified that the prewar intelligence on Iraq's WMD program "was always bounded by large uncertainties and had to be heavily caveated." Days earlier, Rep. Porter Goss, the Republican chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, and Rep. Jane Harman, the senior Democrat on the committee, noted that their committee's examination of the prewar intelligence on Iraq had uncovered "significant deficiencies." Goss and Harman concluded that the intelligence community had based its prewar assessments of Iraq's WMDs and Saddam Hussein's connections to terrorists on outdated, "circumstantial," and "fragmentary" information with "too many uncertainties." The two legislators pointed to a "lack of specific intelligence on regime plans and intentions, WMD, and Iraq's support to terrorist groups... from 1998 through 2003." Sen. Pat Roberts, the Republican chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, later seconded these sentiments. He told *The Washington Post* that his committee had discovered that the intelligence had been "sloppy" and inconclusive and that it did not definitively show that



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Iraq possessed WMDs or that Hussein had maintained close connections to Al Qaeda.

How did Bush reply to these indictments of the prewar intelligence—udgments rendered mainly by pro-war Republicans? He insisted repeatedly that he had based his decision to go to war on "good, solid intelligence." Yet the intelligence was hardly "good" or "solid" according to the folks who actually looked at the stuff. Last summer, the White House acknowledged that Bush never even bothered to read the entire NIE on Iraq before resolving to go to war. It was 90 pages long.

And a review of material that is now public shows that the intelligence—solid or not—did not back up many of Bush's assertions. Here is a highly abbreviated run-through:

- **Biological weapons**

In a speech on Oct. 7, 2002, Bush said Iraq possessed a "massive stockpile of biological weapons." The NIE had concluded—wrongly, it now seems—that Iraq had an extensive bioweapons development program. But its conclusions had not mentioned the existence of any gigantic stockpile. And weeks ago, Tenet noted "We said we had no specific information on the types or quantities of [biological] weapons, agent, or stockpiles at Baghdad's disposal."

- **Chemical weapons**

In his high-profile presentation to the U.N. Security Council in February 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell said that it was the administration's "conservative estimate" that Iraq possessed 100 to 500 tons of chemical weapons. His remark made it seem that Iraq might have much more of this deadly stuff. Yet the NIE had reported that the intelligence community "had little specific information on Iraq's CW stockpile." Still, its analysts assumed Hussein "probably" had stocked 100 tons and "possibly" had stored as much as 500 tons of chemical weapons. In other words, they were not sure. Moreover, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the intelligence service of the Pentagon, had at this time produced a report that said, "there is no reliable information on whether Iraq is producing or stockpiling chemical weapons."

- **Nuclear weapons**

Bush and his aides consistently maintained that Hussein had revived his nuclear weapons program. In December 2002, Bush even said, "We don't know whether or not [Hussein] has a nuclear weapon"—a comment suggesting he might have one. Yet Tenet noted last month that before the war, "We said Saddam Hussein did not have a nuclear weapon." Indeed, the NIE said that Iraq could have nuclear weapons by the end of the decade but only "if left unchecked." (At the time of the war, inspections and sanctions were keeping Hussein quite checked.) And the NIE reported that State Department intelligence analysts believed there was no "persuasive evidence that Baghdad had launched a coherent effort to reconstitute its nuclear weapons program."

- **Unmanned aerial vehicles**

In that October 2002 speech, Bush raised a frightening prospect. "We've also discovered through intelligence," he said, "that Iraq has a growing fleet of manned and unmanned aerial vehicles that could be used to disperse chemical or biological weapons across broad areas. We're concerned that Iraq is exploring ways of using these UAVs for missions targeting the United States." But the NIE said that the intelligence suggested that Iraq had an UAV "development program"—that is, not a "growing fleet." And this conclusion—like others—was a matter of internal debate. The NIE noted that U.S. Air Force intelligence analysts—the analysts with the most experience in the UAV field—had concluded that Iraq's UAV were not being developed to deliver WMDs but to conduct reconnaissance missions.

The bottom line is clear: there was plenty of uncertainty—not "no doubt"—in the prewar

intelligence. And now some members of Bush's national security team are covering their rear flanks by pointing to that incertitude and noting, well, of course, everybody knows that intelligence is full of iffy information. A few days ago, CNN's Wolf Blitzer asked Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, "Was there bad intelligence on WMD going into the war." Rumsfeld answered, "Certainly intelligence is always imperfect. It is in any war. It is in any given moment of the day or night." Then why did Bush assert the intelligence left "no doubt"? (In September 2002, Rumsfeld said, "There's no debate in the world as to whether they have those weapons... We all know that. A trained ape knows that." Was this trained ape relying on "always imperfect" intelligence?)

Only a person willfully ignorant of the facts could have said before the war that the intelligence contained "no doubt." And Bush and his posse continue to insist their melodramatic prewar statements were justified by the intelligence in hand. Blitzer showed Rumsfeld a video clip of Rumsfeld telling Congress in September 2002 that Hussein had "amassed large, clandestine stockpiles" of chemical and biological weapons. In response, Rumsfeld told Blitzer that his testimony had been supported by "the assessments of the intelligence community." But as noted above, the intelligence community had not uncovered evidence that Iraq was maintaining enormous secret stockpiles of WMDs.

The prewar intelligence was lousy—hardly slam-dunk material. But Bush made matters worse. He falsely characterized the intelligence, and he and his aides misused it to win support for their war. Bush has appointed a commission to study what happened with the prewar WMD intelligence. As the White House marks the first anniversary of the invasion of Iraq with a variety of events this week, this commission has yet to meet. And so far there is no indication that the commissioners—each handpicked by the White House—will examine how the Bush administration handled the intelligence. Perhaps they don't believe such an investigation is necessary, because on the question of whether Bush abused the intelligence and blatantly misrepresented it, there really can be no doubt.

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