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# Robert Steinback

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## Did our leaders lie to us? Do we even care?

Now that wasn't so bad, was it?"

One of my pro-war acquaintances said this in a reassuring, not gloating, manner. His tone was a congenial gesture in the wake of our heated arguments over the Iraq War in recent weeks; we had remained tensely civil.

I shrugged. Indeed, the shooting war in Iraq had -- from an American vantage point -- gone well. Relatively few casualties on our side; surviving Iraqis clearly pleased to be rid of Saddam Hussein, if wary of our presence.

This summation, of course, ignores many unanswered questions. So I asked him one.

"Would it bother you if we were to discover that George Bush lied about the case for going to war?" I asked.

He knew what I was referring to. His blunt answer left my jaw hanging.

Everyone knows he lied about weapons of mass destruction being the point of the war."

Just a few weeks ago, any statement from me that Bush's case for war was riddled with inconsistencies and illogic would have brought swift and fierce condemnation from this fellow.

Now, basking in the glow of military conquest -- and

confronted by a thus-far futile search for chemical and biological weapons -- this hawk breezily conceded the point while also waving it away as inconsequential.

Have we become a country that wears its hypocrisy openly and proudly?

We Americans have always had a penchant for creative self-delusion. We chafe, for example, at corruption in government, yet routinely reelect the scoundrels who perpetrate it. We demand both services and cuts in the taxes that pay for them.

But it seems the agony of Sept. 11 has pushed us into an altogether new realm, where we don't even care if our rhetoric makes sense, as long as we're led to a feel-good conclusion. The joy of kicking butt obliterates the need to make an honest case for war.

Wasn't it just four years ago -- I reminded my acquaintance -- that a roiling posse of critics piously preached how utterly unacceptable it was for a president to be excused even for a piddling lie that had absolutely no impact on the lives of any non-Beltway American? Bill Clinton was impeached -- impeached! -- for not admitting an intern had performed a sex act on him in the Oval Office.

Now there is plausible doubt that George Bush and Colin Powell were telling us the whole truth when they pronounced, not as a possibility but a fact, that Hussein had these terrible weapons and could at any moment instigate a terrible strike on America.

Bush dismissed the efforts of chief U.N. weapons inspector Hans Blix, whose teams searched for evidence of the chemical and biological weapons that Hussein allegedly possessed, and found nothing. We must go to war anyway, Bush told us, because Hussein refuses to disarm.

Well, where is it all?

Our troops swept across Iraq in three weeks and secured oil wells within hours. Didn't we have a priority list of potential weapons depots to seize and secure? Did we even know

where to start looking?

Now the administration is all but giving up the search, saying it hopes Iraqi informants will eventually lead us to the stuff. If we didn't know where it was, how did we know it was so grave a threat that war was essential?

Did Bush mislead us? Was the American public duped into supporting a war that killed 128 Americans, 31 Britons and thousands of Iraqis, damaged U.S. prestige around the world and may have worsened, rather than improved, U.S. security?

Oh, who cares -- we won the war!

At least Bush wasn't lying about sex in the Oval Office! We'd have impeached him for that.

And, hey, Bush wasn't under oath, as was Clinton -- although it would be nice to believe swearing honesty wouldn't be necessary when a president addresses the nation.

I don't regard my hawkish acquaintance as a hypocrite; for sure, his brutal honesty makes him a rare breed.

But we're heading for big trouble as a nation if we aren't even concerned that our heads of state may be manipulating us by manipulating the truth.

In a nation where hypocrisy is rewarded, expect more lies.

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