

Content Files

Election 2004

The most important election of your life.

Rights & Liberties

Human rights and civil liberties.

MediaCulture

Critical perspectives on our media-driven world.

Movie Mix

Home of The Alternative Movie Awards.

War on Iraq

Coverage of America's war with Iraq.

DrugReporter

News from the front lines of the drug war.

EnviroHealth

From climate change to medical news.

Feedback

Tell us how we're doing.

 **Discussion**

Visit AlterNet's forums for lively discussions on today's news.

[Guests »](#)

[Members »](#)

[Home »](#) [Top Stories »](#)

The Big Lie

By [Nicholas von Hoffman](#), [tomdispatch.com](#)

May 23, 2004

The frightening shark swimming with toothy grin in a giant aquarium does not see the human faces looking in from the other side of the glass. The shark is in a world of its own, with its own reality. Like the shark, Americans don't see the people outside the glass. It is as though America is in a 3,000-mile-wide terrarium, an immense biosphere which has cut it off from the rest of the world and left it to pick its own way down the path of history. By the time the American army stepped into Iraq, the difference in world view between the United States and everybody else had grown to the size of the hole in the ozone layer over the South Pole.

A fanciful explanation for the two realities is that the United States is the continent-wide set for a large scale re-enactment of the movie *The Truman Show*. The plot of that movie has the well-intentioned but naive hero go about his daily life without any suspicion that he is, in fact, in a gigantic soap opera. His hometown is actually the set for the TV show and from earliest childhood he has been manipulated and controlled by the producer and the director. The enthusiastic acceptance by the American multitudes of the Iraqi stuff-and-nonsense coming out of the White House would be understandable if we were all living on a stage set in a village called Freedom Island threatened by a town called Evil Axis.

Americans believed, as they usually do when their government and their television tell them something, but the rest of the world laughed every time George Bush or Colin Powell or Dick Cheney or Donald Rumsfeld thought up yet one more scary reason to invade Iraq. The ill-constructed, clumsy untruths were surprisingly crude for people who have had years to practice the craft of mass deception, and they had only to speak their latest falsehood to be cheered by their countrymen and disbelieved by non-Americans everywhere.

It's not easy to pull off the Big Lie and George Bush failed; though, in mitigation, pulling off a bait-and-switch war demands skillful finagling and this one was complicated. There was the bait (terrorism), then the switch (weapons of mass destruction), then a switch again (kill the dictator), and yet again (regime change). A politician has to be an accomplished teller of tall tales and absurd fabrications to bring off such a demarché. Even the masters of mass prevarication occasionally fail.

Buy This Book

Loud and Clear in an Election Year helps nonprofits use attention on the election year to educate and mobilize voters on the issues.

Print

Get a [print-friendly version](#) of this story.

Also in Top Stories**The Cat That Ate Tofu**

By Michael Rosen-Molina
May 23, 2004

Do You Feel a Draft?

By Katha Pollitt
May 23, 2004

HUTCHINSON: Why the Feds Can't Nail Bad Cops

By Earl Ofari Hutchinson
May 21, 2004

Electoral Shock

By Amit A. Pandya
May 20, 2004

The Marriage Gap

By Jonathan Rauch
May 20, 2004

Read other stories by [Nicholas von Hoffman](#)

Email

Send this story to a friend.

From:

In September 1939, Adolf Hitler made the mistake of dressing up some nondescript clowns in Polish uniforms and having them "attack" the territory of the Third Reich. This was done to show an incredulous world that his invasion of Poland, which quickly followed his costume party on the border, was a justified counter thrust to unprovoked aggression. The world didn't believe him, but Hitler didn't care. At Obersalzberg, just before initiating the hell which was World War II, he had announced that, "The . . . destruction of Poland begins Saturday early. I shall let a few companies in Polish uniform attack in Upper Silesia. . . . Whether the world believes it is quite indifferent. The world believes only in success." Hitler, the Biggest of Big Liars, had the brass and the disdain which George Bush, under his Texas cowpuncher veneer, does not have. This may be to his credit, but without them Iraq was guaranteed to be a bloody mess. If you are going to tell a Big Lie badly, you have to pull off the crime, you have to make it a success. George Bush didn't.

The Big Lie must be simple and it must be repeated until it reverberates like a jack hammer digging up the street in front of where you live: inescapable sound. George Bush, either out of a fumbling honesty, inexperience, or incompetence, did not lie well. His labored and embarrassing build-up to the Iraqi invasion broke every rule for effective deception.

Unlike a chef d'état who has the technique down pat, Bush made the amateur's mistake. He, his spokesmen and women, his spinners and weavers of untruth, his propagandists, all fell into the trap of answering back, elaborating, retracting, and adding on. Instead of the Big Lie, simple and pure, the official U. S. government story grew more ornate and complicated as the date Bush had set for the invasion came closer. Instead of one good reason to go to war, swarms of bad reasons were proffered, which gave skeptics in other countries material to pick his little white fables apart.

A corollary to keeping things simple is to refrain from offering evidence. Where there is no evidence there can be no refutation. Bush, however, trumpeted that he had warehouses full of evidence – which, as it happened, consisted of tons of used paper towels and soiled Kleenex. Once exposed to air and light, the truckloads of proof positive turned into proof negative; the often-cited smoking gun was revealed to be a dribbling water pistol. The more evidence the world's last remaining superpower brought forth, the goofier or more dangerous Mr. Bush appeared to foreigners, who saw him as either a gibbering bobble-head doll or an international menace. In one of the UN's more memorable afternoons, the world heard American Secretary of State Colin Powell, who a year earlier had said that Saddam was toothless and "has not developed any significant capability with respect to weapons of mass destruction," explain to the Security Council that a photograph of what looked like a couple of rusty, abandoned Good Humor ice cream trucks actually showed traveling war germ factories. The ice cream trucks, he told his global audience, many of whom must have been rolling on the floor laughing, were making biological weapons of mass destruction.

Heaping Pelion on Ossa, the secretary of state pulled another photograph out of his attache case. This one, he said, was of an Iraqi pilotless airplane bearing Saddam Hussein's weapons of deadly germs and lethal chemicals, ready for takeoff. To the non-American part of his audience the object

To:

Optional Message:

Support AlterNet

Do you value the information you're getting from AlterNet? Please show your support with a [tax-deductible donation](#).

looked like the balsa wood airplanes boys glue together and fly in the park. After the model airplanes and the ice cream trucks came the aluminum tubes for the nonexistent atom bomb factories, forged documents out of Africa, tales of spies and agents meeting in Viennese cafes, far-fetched drabs and super-secret drabs of what was hopefully called intelligence. The more of it Powell and Bush gave the world, the less the world believed.

Mexican President Vincente Fox and Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien were having none of George Bush's mega-fibs. The United Kingdom, the other partner in the Coalition of the Willing – a phrase the White House tunesmiths must wish they could take back – was dragged into the Iraqi adventure over the protests of millions of its indignant subjects by a prime minister whose consecration to the Anglo-American "special relationship" almost destroyed his career. When it came to foreign politicians rallying to the American cause, there were few Bush could count on, though he had the support of Ariel Sharon, a man who has never seen an Arab he didn't want to throttle, and Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian premier/businessman shunned as a crook and white collar criminal by all of Europe.

Nevertheless, the voluble Silvio had a way of expressing the less-than-articulate George Bush's thoughts: "We must be aware of the superiority of our civilization, a system that has guaranteed well-being, respect for human rights – and in contrast with Islamic countries – respect for religious and political rights, a system that has as its values understandings of diversity and tolerance," said the enthusiastic premier, who on another occasion explained the difference between Saddam Hussein and one of Premier Berlusconi's predecessors in the office by remarking that, "Mussolini never killed anyone . . . Mussolini sent people on holiday to confine them [banishment to small islands such as Ponza and Maddalena which are now plush resorts]." Not that the ordinary Italians were rushing to the colors. The idea that Saddam Hussein was an immediate threat to anybody but his own people was disbelieved there and everywhere except in the United States.

There is something distant and abstract about a term like "weapons of mass destruction." You can see how the fear that they might exist could make a lot of people give George Bush and his fellow doomsayers the benefit of the doubt. After all, who's to say that Saddam, being the homicidal swine he is, might not have had a few poison-gas rockets capable of killing people in Israel or even farther afield?

But for most of the world such ruminations and nugatory suspicions did not add up to a case for invasion. Why then did Americans go for it, embracing the preposterous assertion that Saddam Hussein, however malevolent his intentions may have been and however nauseating his past acts, was a fearsomely powerful chieftain able to strike a meaningful blow against the United States?

You didn't have to be a retired general to know it couldn't be. Twelve years before, the American armed forces had demolished the Iraqi military. They had done it in 100 hours of shelling, bombing, and shooting at Saddam's army – which did fight back. Before the 100-hour massacre, American air power had spent days destroying the Iraqi electric power, public utilities, and transportation facilities. After the 100-hour war, if you want to dignify

the 1991 skirmish with that name, a United Nations commission had destroyed Saddam's poison gas, his biologicals, his rickety, inaccurate rockets, and the poor beginnings of a nuclear weapons program. Since then the Americans and the British had – sometimes periodically and sometimes incessantly – bombed whatever Saddam had left in the way of fighting forces.

The defeated – though always devious – dictator had no means of rebuilding the inferior force which had been destroyed in 1991 when he was driven out of Kuwait. After Gulf War I, the United States, through the UN, controlled the sale of Iraqi oil which, other than rugs, was that country's only significant source of income. The United States, again through the UN, decided what and how much Iraq could buy with the little moneys allotted to it. It was scarcely permitted food and medicine. As for guns, perish the thought. Embargoes and sanctions aside, the money wasn't there to pay for the war machine the United States insisted Saddam had but was hiding among the camels. The Iraqi nation was prostrate, as innumerable visitors reported on returning home after seeing Baghdad's hungry children. It was ludicrous to suppose that the dictator and his two sadistic sons posed a threat to anyone other than those unlucky enough to be Iraqi citizens.

What was obvious to others wasn't to Americans. They nursed the thought that people in the rest of the world might not have taken Saddam Hussein to be the toothless tyrant he was if 9/11 had happened to them. If the French and the Germans had seen three thousand of their people murdered in one blow, if they had had a personal experience with terror it might have made them less lenient with a man like the Bastard of Baghdad. A man who, whatever the evidence or the lack thereof, had something to do with the destruction of the World Trade Center; who, you may be sure, was in cahoots with al Qaeda; who, have no doubt about it, was slipping money to fanatic Muslim militants; who could let go forty-five minutes after the command of an immediate missile attack against the United States in the spring of 2003. What was received as subjective theorizing in Europe was flat-out fact in the United States. America and the rest of world were veering away from each other.

The horror of 9/11 had been met with enormous sympathy abroad, but it did not cause people elsewhere to take leave of their senses. None had lost 3,000 people in one blow to terrorist attacks, but the American sense of the uniqueness of what their country had suffered was not taken by others to be a license to go berserk and act like a bull wildly kicking its hind legs and expelling rockets from its nostrils in every direction across the globe. Not even non-Muslim India, which has over the years endured assassinations and terror attacks rivaling or surpassing America's suffering, approved. The Russians, committed to a struggle in which their horrors are answered with a terrorism as appalling as any, could not bring themselves to go along with the invasion of Iraq. Why couldn't America see it? And why is this question so seldom asked?

The above was an excerpt from Nicholas von Hoffman's newest book [Hoax: Why Americans Are Suckered by White House Lies](#). He is a columnist for the New York Observer.

[« Home](#) [« Top Stories](#)

[Mobile/PDA](#) [Writer Guidelines](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Partners](#) [Acknowledgments](#) [Contact Us](#)

© 2003 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved. Reproduction by [Syndication Service](#) only.