If Bush Is Lying, He's Not the First

By David Wise
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The sign on the White House these days might well read "Welcome to Credibility Gap." Sooner or later, every modern administration has fallen into this unwelcome gulch, a disaster that happens when the gap between the government's words and the known facts becomes discernible to the voters. The phrase "credibility gap" came into use during the Democratic administration of Lyndon B. Johnson, but deception as an instrument of national policy began long before that. Misleading official statements, "spin" and, at times, outright lies are an all-too-familiar part of the White House landscape. Government lying has become as American as apple pie.

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For President Bush, the problem centers on the furor over whether he misled the nation and the world by asserting that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and was linked to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda terrorist network. Since the twin allegations were the primary premise for going to war against Saddam Hussein's regime, pressure has been building on the White House to prove its claims. The CIA is busily reviewing intelligence gathered before the war. Congressional leaders are skirmishing about what kind of inquiry to pursue. The Republicans so far have resisted the Democrats' call for public hearings into whether the intelligence on Iraq was faulty or whether it was deliberately warped to fit policy, opting instead for a closed-door format. The investigations may also look into the rival intelligence unit that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld formed in the Pentagon last year, which some analysts claim was set up to find the evidence that the hawks among the policymakers wanted to hear.

Of course, weapons of mass destruction may yet be uncovered in Iraq. But in Poland last month, President Bush startled observers by saying on Polish TV: "We've found the weapons of mass destruction. You know, we found biological laboratories . . . . And we'll find more weapons as time goes on. But for those who say we haven't found the banned manufacturing devices or banned weapons, they're wrong. We found them."

Bush was referring to two mobile units that the CIA had concluded were designed to manufacture biological substances. But by artfully joining the "manufacturing devices or banned weapons" in one sentence, his comments nicely fuzzed up what he meant by saying, "We found them."

The casual, almost breezy nature of the president's statement in Poland seemed strangely out of step with the intensity of the hunt underway in Iraq. For weeks, military units had been searching, without success, for weapons of mass destruction. Officials on the scene had warned that it could take months to uncover the evidence, and some privately had expressed surprise about their failure to turn up any hard evidence.

This past week, as questions persisted about the missing weapons, there appeared to be a subtle shift in the administration's statements. Condoleezza Rice, the president's national security adviser, indicated that Bush had relied on the director of intelligence, George Tenet, and the information produced by his predecessors. Then the president himself said that Iraq had a weapons "program," which some might construe as different than saying that Iraq actually had weapons.

As it prepared for war, however, the administration made a number of dramatic pronouncements about Iraq's capabilities. As early as Oct. 7, 2002, Bush had declared in a nationally televised speech that Iraq "possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons. It is seeking nuclear weapons."

On Feb. 8, Bush said in his weekly radio address: "We have sources that tell us that Saddam Hussein recently authorized Iraqi field commanders to use chemical weapons -- the very weapons the dictator tells us he does not have." No such weapons were used against American troops during the fighting.

On March 17, when Bush said Saddam had 48 hours to leave town, the president said in another speech to the nation that "intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised. The regime has already used weapons of mass destruction . . . ."

Similar statements were made by other administration officials in the run up to the war. On Jan. 7, at a Pentagon news briefing, Rumsfeld said, "There's no doubt in my mind but that they currently have chemical and biological weapons." Pressed by a reporter, Rumsfeld made clear that he was not basing his assertion on the fact that Iraqis had used chemical weapons in the past.

Two days later, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said, "We know for a fact that there are weapons there." On March 16, Vice President Cheney had even more frightening news. On NBC's "Meet the Press," he said: "We believe he [Saddam] has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons."

On March 30, on ABC's "This Week With George Stephanopoulos," Rumsfeld, referring to "weapons of mass destruction," said flatly: "We know where they are."

The administration might have been citing the best intelligence it had at the time. But it's hardly surprising that questions are now being raised about the truthfulness of these statements. Nor is it the first time that the Bush administration has run into difficulty in this area. Last year, it was disclosed that the Pentagon had created a propaganda arm to plant false news stories in the foreign press. It was called by an Orwellian title -- the Office of Strategic Influence -- but the unit was soon axed in the wake of a public outcry.

For the modern presidency, the U-2 affair in 1960 was the watershed event that marked the start of a long train of fibs, lies and artful dodging. When CIA pilot Francis Gary Powers was shot down inside Soviet territory, the State Department denied that there had been any deliberate attempt to violate Soviet air space. It was a bald-faced lie, and when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev produced the live pilot, President Dwight Eisenhower was forced to admit the spy flight. The truth came as a shock to most Americans -- Eisenhower was a revered father figure and war hero.

During the Kennedy administration, Arthur Sylvester, the assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, gave a speech defending the government's "right, if necessary, to lie . . ." He did add, "when it is going up into a nuclear war," but even qualified, it was an unprecedented display of candor that caused a firestorm. Sylvester's mistake was to say out loud what many officials thought. And the Kennedy administration did lie in 1961 during the CIA-backed invasion of Cuba, falsely insisting that the United States was not behind the attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro.

Lyndon Johnson claimed that his great-great-grandfather had died at the Alamo, which was total fiction. The joke that went around Washington during the LBJ years had someone asking, "How can you tell when Lyndon is lying?" The answer: "When his lips move." That was perhaps unkind and certainly untrue. But it was under Johnson that a credibility gap turned into a political Death Valley for Oval Office occupants.

Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing Johnson to use force in southeast Asia, because Johnson assured Congress and the public that American destroyers had been attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats in the gulf on Aug. 4, 1964. It wasn't true.

What Johnson did not say when he addressed the nation just before midnight that day was that 10 hours earlier, the Pentagon had received a cable from the commander of the Maddox, one of two destroyers supposedly attacked, warning that reports of "torpedoes fired appear doubtful," the work of an "overeager sonarman." Nor did the public know that half an hour before the president went on the air, the Pentagon was still frantically cabling for confirmation of an attack.

Nine years later, more than 58,000 Americans had died in Vietnam, including 47,000 on the battlefield, and more than 303,000 were wounded. Only much later did a divided nation learn the truth about the incident in the gulf. ". . . we concluded maybe they hadn't fired at all," Johnson says to Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara on one of the LBJ audio tapes edited by historian Michael Beschloss. "Hell, those dumb, stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish," Johnson is quoted as saying by Stanley Karnow in "Vietnam: A History." Public mistrust of Johnson, especially over the Vietnam war, led to his decision not to run for reelection in 1968.

Richard Nixon, as a result of the Watergate scandal, was the first president to resign because of his lies. The temptation of chief executives to cover up political embarrassment by invoking national security was never better illustrated than during that saga. In one exchange,

captured on Nixon's taped conversations, Nixon and two aides, John Dean and H.R. Haldeman, are scrambling to come up with an explanation for the break-in at the office of the psychiatrist of Daniel Ellsberg, the man who leaked the Pentagon Papers to the press. The illegal break-in was the work of the White House "plumbers," a secret group created to plug such leaks:

Dean: You might put it on a national security grounds basis.

Haldeman: It absolutely was.

Nixon: National security. We had to get information for national security grounds . . . the whole thing was national security.

Dean: I think we could get by on that.

Governments lie for a variety of reasons. The United States emerged from World War II as a superpower. As a result, a vast national security bureaucracy was created, including the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies. The CIA ran hundreds of covert operations, and cover stories were prepared to explain them in case of exposure. The test was not truth, but whether a cover story would withstand scrutiny and be accepted as "plausible denial." Many of the now-celebrated government fabrications -- from the Gary Powers U-2 flight, to the Bay of Pigs, to the Iran-contra affair -- fall into this category.

Of course, political leaders also lie to try to save themselves from personal embarrassment. Bill Clinton insisted he never had sex with "that woman," a deceit that led to his impeachment and tarnished his presidency, even if it will help to sell large numbers of books for his wife. (And for him as well, when he will no doubt rehash the Monica Lewinsky affair in his own memoir due out next year.)

Sometimes the falsehoods are designed to protect a military operation. On the eve of President Reagan's invasion of Grenada in October 1983, White House spokesman Larry Speakes called a network report of the invasion "preposterous." The next day, U.S. forces landed on the Caribbean island.

Deception in battle -- to mask the site of the Normandy invasion in World War II, for example -- is defensible. Official, institutional lying as an ongoing instrument of foreign policy cannot be justified.

Six years ago, the CIA admitted that the Air Force lied for years about flights of high-altitude spy planes during the Cold War. The secrecy about the flights and bogus official explanations -- the Air Force said people were seeing "ice crystals" -- gave rise to the belief by some citizens that the government was covering up the existence of UFOs.

And that is the problem. Official lies erode the public's confidence in its leaders and inspire conspiracy theories. Public trust between the government and the electorate is the bedrock of a democracy that ultimately rests on the informed consent of the governed. Ethics professor Sissela Bok has written of "the presumption against lying" that forms the basis of trust, without which "institutions collapse." Official lying destroys that bond.

There is an alternative to government lying. It is to tell the truth. Or, if need be, to remain silent.

David Wise is the author of "The Politics of Lying" (Random House), a 1973 book examining how and why governments engage in secrecy and deception. His most recent book is "Spy: The Inside Story of How the FBI's Robert Hanssen Betrayed America" (Random House).