The Case Against George W. Bush

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It may have been the guy in the hood teetering on the stool, electrodes clamped to his genitals. Or smirking Lynndie England and her leash. Maybe it was the smarmy memos tapped out by soft-fingered lawyers itching to justify such barbarism. The grudging, lunatic retreat of the neocons from their long-standing assertion that Saddam was in cahoots with Osama didn't hurt. Even the Enron audiotapes and their celebration of craven sociopathy likely played a part. As a result of all these displays and countless smaller ones, you could feel, a couple of months back, as summer spread across the country, the ground shifting beneath your feet. Not unlike that scene in The Day After Tomorrow, then in theaters, in which the giant ice shelf splits asunder, this was more a paradigm shift than anything strictly tectonic. No cataclysmic ice age, admittedly, yet something was in the air, and people were inhaling deeply. I began to get calls from friends whose parents had always voted Republican, "but not this time."

There was the staid Zbigniew Brzezinski on the staid NewsHour with Jim Lehrer sneering at the "Orwellian language" flowing out of the Pentagon. Word spread through the usual channels that old hands from the days of Bush the Elder were quietly (but not too quietly) appalled by his son's misadventure in Iraq.

Suddenly, everywhere you went, a surprising number of folks seemed to have had just about enough of what the Bush administration was dishing out. A fresh age appeared on the horizon, accompanied by the sound of scales falling from people's eyes. It felt something like a demonstration of that highest of American prerogatives and the most deeply cherished American freedom: dissent.

Oddly, even my father's funeral contributed. Throughout that long, stately, overtelevised week in early June, items would appear in the newspaper discussing the Republicans' eagerness to capitalize (subtly, tastefully) on the outpouring

of affection for my father and turn it to Bush's advantage for the fall election. The familiar "Heir to Reagan" puffballs were reinflated and loosed over the proceedings like (subtle, tasteful) Mylar balloons. Predictably, this backfired. People were treated to a side-by-side comparison - Ronald W. Reagan versus George W. Bush - and it's no surprise who suffered for it. Misty-eyed with nostalgia, people set aside old political gripes for a few days and remembered what friend and foe always conceded to Ronald Reagan: He was damned impressive in the role of leader of the free world. A sign in the crowd, spotted during the slow roll to the Capitol rotunda, seemed to sum up the mood - a portrait of my father and the words NOW THERE WAS A PRESIDENT.

The comparison underscored something important. And the guy on the stool, Lynndie, and her grinning cohorts, they brought the word: The Bush administration can't be trusted. The parade of Bush officials before various commissions and committees - Paul Wolfowitz, who couldn't quite remember how many young Americans had been sacrificed on the altar of his ideology; John Ashcroft, lip quivering as, for a delicious, fleeting moment, it looked as if Senator Joe Biden might just come over the table at him - these were a continuing reminder. The Enron creeps, too - a reminder of how certain environments and particular habits of mind can erode common decency. People noticed. A tipping point had been reached. The issue of credibility was back on the table. The L-word was in circulation. Not the tired old bromide liberal. That's so 1988. No, this time something much more potent: liar.

Politicians will stretch the truth. They'll exaggerate their accomplishments, paper over their gaffes. Spin has long been the lingua franca of the political realm. But George W. Bush and his administration have taken "normal" mendacity to a startling new level far beyond lies of convenience. On top of the usual massaging of public perception, they traffic in big lies, indulge in any number of symptomatic small lies, and, ultimately, have come to embody dishonesty itself. They are a lie. And people, finally, have started catching on.

None of this, needless to say, guarantees Bush a one-term presidency. The

far-right wing of the country - nearly one third of us by some estimates - continues to regard all who refuse to drink the Kool-Aid (liberals, rationalists, Europeans, et cetera) as agents of Satan. Bush could show up on video canoodling with Paris Hilton and still bank their vote. Right-wing talking heads continue painting anyone who fails to genuflect deeply enough as a "hater," and therefore a nut job, probably a crypto-Islamist car bomber. But these protestations have taken on a hysterical, almost comically desperate tone. It's one thing to get trashed by Michael Moore. But when Nobel laureates, a vast majority of the scientific community, and a host of current and former diplomats, intelligence operatives, and military officials line up against you, it becomes increasingly difficult to characterize the opposition as fringe wackos.

Does anyone really favor an administration that so shamelessly lies? One that so tenaciously clings to secrecy, not to protect the American people, but to protect itself? That so willfully misrepresents its true aims and so knowingly misleads the people from whom it derives its power? I simply cannot think so. And to come to the same conclusion does not make you guilty of swallowing some liberal critique of the Bush presidency, because that's not what this is. This is the critique of a person who thinks that lying at the top levels of his government is abhorrent. Call it the honest guy's critique of George W. Bush.

The most egregious examples OF distortion and misdirection - which the administration even now cannot bring itself to repudiate - involve our putative "War on Terror" and our subsequent foray into Iraq.

During his campaign for the presidency, Mr. Bush pledged a more "humble" foreign policy. "I would take the use of force very seriously," he said. "I would be guarded in my approach." Other countries would resent us "if we're an arrogant nation." He sniffed at the notion of "nation building." "Our military is meant to fight and win wars. . . . And when it gets overextended, morale drops." International cooperation and consensus building would be the cornerstone of a Bush administration's approach to the larger world. Given

candidate Bush's remarks, it was hard to imagine him, as president, flipping a stiff middle finger at the world and charging off adventuring in the Middle East.

But didn't 9/11 reshuffle the deck, changing everything? Didn't Mr. Bush, on September 12, 2001, awaken to the fresh realization that bad guys in charge of Islamic nations constitute an entirely new and grave threat to us and have to be ruthlessly confronted lest they threaten the American homeland again? Wasn't Saddam Hussein rushed to the front of the line because he was complicit with the hijackers and in some measure responsible for the atrocities in Washington, D. C., and at the tip of Manhattan?

Well, no.

As Bush's former Treasury secretary, Paul O'Neill, and his onetime "terror czar," Richard A. Clarke, have made clear, the president, with the enthusiastic encouragement of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, was contemplating action against Iraq from day one. "From the start, we were building the case against Hussein and looking at how we could take him out," O'Neill said. All they needed was an excuse. Clarke got the same impression from within the White House. Afghanistan had to be dealt with first; that's where the actual perpetrators were, after all. But the Taliban was a mere appetizer; Saddam was the entrée. (Or who knows? The soup course?) It was simply a matter of convincing the American public (and our representatives) that war was justified.

The real - but elusive - prime mover behind the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden, was quickly relegated to a back burner (a staff member at Fox News - the cable-TV outlet of the Bush White House - told me a year ago that mere mention of bin Laden's name was forbidden within the company, lest we be reminded that the actual bad guy remained at large) while Saddam's Iraq became International Enemy Number One. Just like that, a country whose economy had been reduced to shambles by international sanctions, whose military was less than half the size it had been when the U. S. Army rolled over it during the first Gulf

war, that had extensive no-flight zones imposed on it in the north and south as well as constant aerial and satellite surveillance, and whose lethal weapons and capacity to produce such weapons had been destroyed or seriously degraded by UN inspection teams became, in Mr. Bush's words, "a threat of unique urgency" to the most powerful nation on earth.

Fanciful but terrifying scenarios were introduced: Unmanned aircraft, drones, had been built for missions targeting the U. S., Bush told the nation. "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud," National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice deadpanned to CNN. And, Bush maintained, "Iraq could decide on any given day to provide a biological or chemical weapon to a terrorist group or individual terrorists." We "know" Iraq possesses such weapons, Rumsfeld and Vice-President Cheney assured us. We even "know" where they are hidden. After several months of this mumbo jumbo, 70 percent of Americans had embraced the fantasy that Saddam destroyed the World Trade Center.

All these assertions have proved to be baseless and, we've since discovered, were regarded with skepticism by experts at the time they were made. But contrary opinions were derided, ignored, or covered up in the rush to war. Even as of this writing, Dick Cheney clings to his mad assertion that Saddam was somehow at the nexus of a worldwide terror network.

And then there was Abu Ghraib. Our "war president" may have been justified in his assumption that Americans are a warrior people. He pushed the envelope in thinking we'd be content as an occupying power, but he was sadly mistaken if he thought that ordinary Americans would tolerate an image of themselves as torturers. To be fair, the torture was meant to be secret. So were the memos justifying such treatment that had floated around the White House, Pentagon, and Justice Department for more than a year before the first photos came to light.
The neocons no doubt appreciate that few of us have the stones to practice the New Warfare. Could you slip a pair of women's panties over the head of a naked,

cowering stranger while forcing him to masturbate? What would you say while sodomizing him with a toilet plunger? Is keeping someone awake till he hallucinates inhumane treatment or merely "sleep management"?

Most of us know the answers to these questions, so it was incumbent upon the administration to pretend that Abu Ghraib was an aberration, not policy. Investigations, we were assured, were already under way; relevant bureaucracies would offer unstinting cooperation; the handful of miscreants would be sternly disciplined. After all, they didn't "represent the best of what America's all about." As anyone who'd watched the proceedings of the 9/11 Commission could have predicted, what followed was the usual administration strategy of stonewalling, obstruction, and obfuscation. The appointment of investigators was stalled; documents were withheld, including the full report by Major General Antonio Taguba, who headed the Army's primary investigation into the abuses at Abu Ghraib. A favorite moment for many featured John McCain growing apoplectic as Donald Rumsfeld and an entire table full of army brass proved unable to answer the simple question Who was in charge at Abu Ghraib?

The Bush administration no doubt had its real reasons for invading and occupying Iraq. They've simply chosen not to share them with the American public. They sought justification for ignoring the Geneva Convention and other statutes prohibiting torture and inhumane treatment of prisoners but were loath to acknowledge as much. They may have ideas worth discussing, but they don't welcome the rest of us in the conversation. They don't trust us because they don't dare expose their true agendas to the light of day. There is a surreal quality to all this: Occupation is liberation; Iraq is sovereign, but we're in control; Saddam is in Iraqi custody, but we've got him; we'll get out as soon as an elected Iraqi government asks us, but we'll be there for years to come. Which is what we counted on in the first place, only with rose petals and easy coochie.

This Möbius reality finds its domestic analogue in the perversely cynical "Clear Skies" and "Healthy Forests" sloganeering at Bush's EPA and in the

administration's irresponsible tax cutting and other fiscal shenanigans. But the Bush administration has always worn strangely tinted shades, and you wonder to what extent Mr. Bush himself lives in a world of his own imagining.

And chances are your America and George W. Bush's America are not the same place. If you are dead center on the earning scale in real-world twenty-first-century America, you make a bit less than $32,000 a year, and $32,000 is not a sum that Mr. Bush has ever associated with getting by in his world. Bush, who has always managed to fail upwards in his various careers, has never had a job the way you have a job - where not showing up one morning gets you fired, costing you your health benefits. He may find it difficult to relate personally to any of the nearly two million citizens who've lost their jobs under his administration, the first administration since Herbert Hoover's to post a net loss of jobs. Mr. Bush has never had to worry that he couldn't afford the best available health care for his children. For him, forty-three million people without health insurance may be no more than a politically inconvenient abstraction. When Mr. Bush talks about the economy, he is not talking about your economy. His economy is filled with pals called Kenny-boy who fly around in their own airplanes. In Bush's economy, his world, friends relocate offshore to avoid paying taxes. Taxes are for chumps like you. You are not a friend. You're the help. When the party Mr. Bush is hosting in his world ends, you'll be left picking shrimp toast out of the carpet.

All administrations will dissemble, distort, or outright lie when their backs are against the wall, when honesty begins to look like political suicide. But this administration seems to lie reflexively, as if it were simply the easiest option for busy folks with a lot on their minds. While the big lies are more damning and of immeasurably greater import to the nation, it is the small, unnecessary prevarications that may be diagnostic. Who lies when they don't have to? When the simple truth, though perhaps embarrassing in the short run, is nevertheless in one's long-term self-interest? Why would a president whose

calling card is his alleged rock-solid integrity waste his chief asset for penny-ante stakes? Habit, perhaps. Or an inability to admit even small mistakes.

Mr. Bush's tendency to meander beyond the bounds of truth was evident during the 2000 campaign but was largely ignored by the mainstream media. His untruths simply didn't fit the agreed-upon narrative. While generally acknowledged to be lacking in experience, depth, and other qualifications typically considered useful in a leader of the free world, Bush was portrayed as a decent fellow nonetheless, one whose straightforwardness was a given. None of that "what the meaning of is is" business for him. And, God knows, no furtive, taxpayer-funded fellatio sessions with the interns. Al Gore, on the other hand, was depicted as a dubious self-reinventor, stained like a certain blue dress by Bill Clinton's prurient transgressions. He would spend valuable weeks explaining away statements - "I invented the Internet" - that he never made in the first place.
All this left the coast pretty clear for Bush.

Scenario typical of the 2000 campaign: While debating Al Gore, Bush tells two obvious - if not exactly earth-shattering - lies and is not challenged.
First, he claims to have supported a patient's bill of rights while governor of Texas. This is untrue. He, in fact, vigorously resisted such a measure, only reluctantly bowing to political reality and allowing it to become law without his signature. Second, he announces that Gore has outspent him during the campaign. The opposite is true: Bush has outspent Gore. These misstatements are briefly acknowledged in major press outlets, which then quickly return to the more germane issues of Gore's pancake makeup and whether a certain feminist author has counseled him to be more of an "alpha male."

Having gotten away with such witless falsities, perhaps Mr. Bush and his team felt somehow above day-to-day truth. In any case, once ensconced in the White House, they picked up where they left off.

In the immediate aftermath and confusion of 9/11, Bush, who on that day was in Sarasota, Florida, conducting an emergency reading of "The Pet

Goat," was whisked off to Nebraska aboard Air Force One. While this may have been entirely sensible under the chaotic circumstances - for all anyone knew at the time, Washington might still have been under attack - the appearance was, shall we say, less than gallant. So a story was concocted: There had been a threat to Air Force One that necessitated the evasive maneuver. Bush's chief political advisor, Karl Rove, cited "specific" and "credible" evidence to that effect. The story quickly unraveled. In truth, there was no such threat.

Then there was Bush's now infamous photo-op landing aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln and his subsequent speech in front of a large banner emblazoned MISSION ACCOMPLISHED. The banner, which loomed in the background as Bush addressed the crew, became problematic as it grew clear that the mission in Iraq - whatever that may have been - was far from accomplished. "Major combat operations," as Bush put it, may have technically ended, but young Americans were still dying almost daily. So the White House dealt with the questionable banner in a manner befitting a president pledged to "responsibility and accountability": It blamed the sailors. No surprise, a bit of digging by journalists revealed the banner and its premature triumphalism to be the work of the White House communications office.

More serious by an order of magnitude was the administration's dishonesty concerning pre-9/11 terror warnings. As questions first arose about the country's lack of preparedness in the face of terrorist assault, Condoleezza Rice was dispatched to the pundit arenas to assure the nation that "no one could have imagined terrorists using aircraft as weapons." In fact, terrorism experts had warned repeatedly of just such a calamity. In June 2001, CIA director George Tenet sent Rice an intelligence report warning that "it is highly likely that a significant Al Qaeda attack is in the near future, within several weeks." Two intelligence briefings given to Bush in the summer of 2001 specifically connected Al Qaeda to the imminent danger of hijacked planes being used as weapons. According to The New York Times, after the second of these briefings,

titled "Bin Laden Determined to Attack Inside United States," was delivered to the president at his ranch in Crawford, Texas, in August, Bush "broke off from work early and spent most of the day fishing." This was the briefing Dr. Rice dismissed as "historical" in her testimony before the 9/11 Commission.

What's odd is that none of these lies were worth the breath expended in the telling. If only for self-serving political reasons, honesty was the way to go. The flight of Air Force One could easily have been explained in terms of security precautions taken in the confusion of momentous events. As for the carrier landing, someone should have fallen on his or her sword at the first hint of trouble: We told the president he needed to do it; he likes that stuff and was gung-ho; we figured, What the hell?; it was a mistake. The banner? We thought the sailors would appreciate it. In retrospect, also a mistake. Yup, we sure feel dumb now. Owning up to the 9/11 warnings would have entailed more than simple embarrassment. But done forthrightly and immediately, an honest reckoning would have earned the Bush team some respect once the dust settled. Instead, by needlessly tap-dancing, Bush's White House squandered vital credibility, turning even relatively minor gaffes into telling examples of its tendency to distort and evade the truth.

But image is everything in this White House, and the image of George Bush as a noble and infallible warrior in the service of his nation must be fanatically maintained, because behind the image lies . . . nothing? As Jonathan Alter of Newsweek has pointed out, Bush has "never fully inhabited" the presidency. Bush apologists can smilingly excuse his malopropisms and vagueness as the plainspokenness of a man of action, but watching Bush flounder when attempting to communicate extemporaneously, one is left with the impression that he is ineloquent not because he can't speak but because he doesn't bother to think.

George W. Bush promised to "change the tone in Washington" and ran for office as a moderate, a "compassionate conservative," in the focus-group-tested sloganeering of his campaign. Yet he has governed from the right wing

of his already conservative party, assiduously tending a "base" that includes, along with the expected Fortune 500 fat cats, fiscal evangelicals who talk openly of doing away with Social Security and Medicare, of shrinking government to the size where they can, in tax radical Grover Norquist's phrase, "drown it in the bathtub." That base also encompasses a healthy share of anti-choice zealots, homophobic bigots, and assorted purveyors of junk science. Bush has tossed bones to all of them - "partial birth" abortion legislation, the promise of a constitutional amendment banning marriage between homosexuals, federal roadblocks to embryonic-stem-cell research, even comments suggesting presidential doubts about Darwinian evolution. It's not that Mr. Bush necessarily shares their worldview; indeed, it's unclear whether he embraces any coherent philosophy. But this president, who vowed to eschew politics in favor of sound policy, panders nonetheless in the interest of political gain. As John DiIulio, Bush's former head of the Office of Community and Faith-Based Initiatives, once told this magazine, "What you've got is everything - and I mean everything - being run by the political arm."

This was not what the American electorate opted for when, in 2000, by a slim but decisive margin of more than half a million votes, they chose . . . the other guy. Bush has never had a mandate. Surveys indicate broad public dissatisfaction with his domestic priorities. How many people would have voted for Mr. Bush in the first place had they understood his eagerness to pass on crushing debt to our children or seen his true colors regarding global warming and the environment? Even after 9/11, were people really looking to be dragged into an optional war under false pretenses?

If ever there was a time for uniting and not dividing, this is it. Instead, Mr. Bush governs as if by divine right, seeming to actually believe that a wise God wants him in the White House and that by constantly evoking the horrible memory of September 11, 2001, he can keep public anxiety stirred up enough to carry him to another term.

Understandably, some supporters of Mr. Bush's will believe I harbor a personal vendetta against the man, some seething resentment. One conservative

commentator, based on earlier remarks I've made, has already discerned "jealousy" on my part; after all, Bush, the son of a former president, now occupies that office himself, while I, most assuredly, will not. Truth be told, I have no personal feelings for Bush at all. I hardly know him, having met him only twice, briefly and uneventfully - once during my father's presidency and once during my father's funeral. I'll acknowledge occasional annoyance at the pretense that he's somehow a clone of my father, but far from threatening, I see this more as silly and pathetic. My father, acting roles excepted, never pretended to be anyone but himself. His Republican party, furthermore, seems a far cry from the current model, with its cringing obeisance to the religious Right and its kill-anything-that-moves attack instincts. Believe it or not, I don't look in the mirror every morning and see my father looming over my shoulder. I write and speak as nothing more or less than an American citizen, one who is plenty angry about the direction our country is being dragged by the current administration. We have reached a critical juncture in our nation's history, one ripe with both danger and possibility. We need leadership with the wisdom to prudently confront those dangers and the imagination to boldly grasp the possibilities. Beyond issues of fiscal irresponsibility and ill-advised militarism, there is a question of trust. George W. Bush and his allies don't trust you and me. Why on earth, then, should we trust them?

Fortunately, we still live in a democratic republic. The Bush team cannot expect a cabal of right-wing justices to once again deliver the White House. Come November 2, we will have a choice: We can embrace a lie, or we can restore a measure of integrity to our government. We can choose, as a bumper sticker I spotted in Seattle put it, SOMEONE ELSE FOR PRESIDENT.
