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## America's Matrix

By Robert Parry  
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“Matrix” and its sequel. “Matrix Reloaded,” offer a useful analogy for anyone trying to make sense of the chasm that has opened between what’s real and what Americans perceive is real. Like the science-fiction world of the two movies, a false reality is being pulled daily over people’s eyes, often through what they see and hear on their TV screens. Facts have lost value. Logic rarely applies.

Some living in this “American Matrix” are like the everyday people in the movies, simply oblivious to what’s going on beneath the surface, either too busy or too bored to find out. Others appear to know better but behave like Cipher, the character in the original movie who chooses the fake pleasures of the Matrix over what Morpheus calls “the desert of the real.”

Many Americans so enjoyed the TV-driven nationalism of the Iraq War, for instance, that they didn’t want it spoiled by reality. During the conflict, they objected to news outlets showing mangled bodies or wounded children or U.S. POWs. Presenting the ugly face of war was seen as unpatriotic or somehow disloyal to “the troops.” Only positive images were welcome and dissent was deemed almost treasonous.

Now, even as U.S. forces in Iraq slide closer to the guerrilla-war quagmire that some skeptics predicted, Americans continue to say they trust George W. Bush to handle the situation. Some military analysts close to the Bush administration are beginning to feel differently, however. “We’re hanging on by our fingernails,” one told me recently.

But Americans still prefer to feel good about the war. They want to believe that the U.S. invasion was just, and that Saddam Hussein really was poised to use weapons of mass destruction. By large majorities, Americans either believe that these weapons have already been found or they don’t care that the Bush administration may have misled the world.

The Disputed Labs

For its part, the U.S. news media – from Fox News to the New York Times – repeatedly trumpeted supposed weapons discoveries, only to play down later stories showing that the original reports were bogus. The only evidence Bush now cites is the discovery of two mobile labs that the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency insist could be used for producing biological weapons.

“Those who say we haven’t found the banned manufacturing devices or banned weapons are wrong,” Bush declared, referring to the mobile labs. “We found them.” [Washington Post, May 31, 2003]

Yet, the U.S. intelligence analysis of these labs is more a piece of the American Matrix than a dispassionate examination of the evidence. The report reads like one more example of selective intelligence, which spurns plausible alternatives if they don’t fit Bush’s political needs.

In this case, the Bush administration, which said for months that the Iraqi weapons secrets would be revealed once U.S. forces captured and questioned Iraq’s top scientists, now doesn’t like what those scientists are saying. When questioned, the captured scientists said the labs were used to produce hydrogen for artillery weather balloons.

In the CIA-DIA report, U.S. analysts agreed that hydrogen production was a plausible explanation for the labs. “Some of the features of the trailer – a gas collection system and the presence of a caustic – are consistent with both bio-production and hydrogen production,” the CIA-DIA report said. “The plant’s design possibly could be used to produce hydrogen using a chemical reaction.”

The report also noted that “preliminary sample analysis results are negative for five standard BW agents, including bacillus anthracis, and for growth media for those agents.” Also missing are companion mobile labs that would be needed “to prepare and sterilize the media and to concentrate and possibly dry the agent, before the agent is ready for introduction into a delivery system, such as bulk-filled munitions,” the CIA-DIA report said.

In other words, U.S. intelligence analysts found no evidence that these labs had been used to make biological weapons or that the two labs alone could produce weaponized BW agents. But that was obviously the wrong answer.

Arguing the Issue

So the CIA-DIA analysis veered off into an argumentative direction. The report asserted that the labs would be “inefficient” for producing hydrogen because their capacity is “larger than typical units for hydrogen production for weather balloons.” Better systems are “commercially available,” the CIA-DIA report said.

But the U.S. analysts don’t assess whether those more efficient systems would have been “commercially available” to Iraq, which has faced a decade of trade sanctions. What may be considered “inefficient” to U.S. scientists might be the best home-made option available to Iraqis.

Having made the inefficiency argument, the CIA-DIA analysis concluded that hydrogen production must be a “cover story” and that “BW agent production is the only consistent, logical purpose for these vehicles.” In the American Matrix, pretty much any argument can work if the guys in charge want it to. [For more details, see the CIA-DIA report, May 28, 2003]

Tom Tomorrow’s “This Modern World” captured this aspect of what he called “The Republican Matrix” in a cartoon that also uses the analogy of the Matrix movies.

In the cartoon’s drawings, clueless Americans parrot back Bush administration messages as the cartoon asks, “What is the Republican Matrix? It is an illusion that engulfs us all...a steady barrage of images which obscure reality. It is a world born anew each day...in which there is nothing to be learned from the lessons of the past ...a world where logic holds no sway...where up is down and black is white...where reality itself is a malleable thing...subject to constant revision. In short, it’s their world.”

The cartoon ends with a frame showing Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in sunglasses like those worn by the anti-human “agents” in the Matrix. “What should we do today, fellas?” Bush asks. “Any damn thing we want, George,” answers Cheney.

Indeed, Bush and his advisers have grasped that they face few limits on how far they can push their political/media advantage. Protected by an army of media allies, who either share a conservative ideology or see financial gain in playing along, Bush has learned that he stands little risk no matter how over-the-top his imagery or assertions. Many Americans, too, seem to enjoy the

process of their own manipulation.

## Top Gun

The administration is so confident about this control that Bush dared dress up in a Top Gun outfit for an unnecessary jet flight to a U.S. aircraft carrier on May 1 to declare victory over Iraq.

The USS Abraham Lincoln, which had been at sea for 10 months, was within helicopter range but that didn't offer the exciting visuals of a carrier landing and Bush in a flight suit. So, the ship slowed its pace and circled idly in the Pacific Ocean to guarantee favorable camera angles while servicemen and women delayed their homecomings.

Though Bush's father made great fun of Democrat Michael Dukakis when he rode in a tank in 1988 and the national news media had a field day in 1993 when President Bill Clinton got a haircut while Air Force One waited at a Los Angeles airport, the tone was different when Bush pulled off his Top Gun performance.

"U.S. television coverage ranged from respectful to gushing," observed New York Times columnist Paul Krugman. "Nobody seemed bothered that Mr. Bush, who appears to have skipped more than a year of the National Guard service that kept him out of Vietnam, is now emphasizing his flying experience." [NYT, May 6, 2003]

Indeed, the likes of MSNBC's Chris Matthews used the occasion of Bush strutting about the carrier's deck to praise Bush's manliness in contrast to Democratic presidential candidates, including Sen. John Kerry who earned a Silver Star in Vietnam.

"Imagine Joe Lieberman in this costume, or even John Kerry," Matthews said on MSNBC on May 1. "Nobody looks right in the role Bush has set for the presidency-commander-in-chief, medium height, medium build, looks good in a jet pilot's costume or uniform, rather has a certain swagger, not too literary, certainly not too verbal, but a guy who speaks plainly and wins wars. I think that job definition is hard to match for the Dems."

On the same show, when Matthews was asked about the Boston Globe article in 2000 describing gaps in Bush's National Guard duty, Matthews swatted the question away without addressing its substance. "There's any chance that the Boston Globe city room will ever endorse George Bush for president?" Matthews laughed. "Great reporting. But is it going to cost him a

single state? They're not going to get Massachusetts to start with.”

What the political odds in Massachusetts had to do with the factual issue of whether Bush ducked out on his military service, possibly going AWOL and getting protected by his father's influence, was not explained. In the American Matrix after all, rational connections aren't necessary. Like facts, logic is routinely overwhelmed by image, tone and 'tude. [For more analysis on the news media's treatment of Bush's aircraft landing, see Bob Somerby's DailyHowler.]

### Mount Rushmore

Bush got the images he wanted in his carrier landing while his aides mounted a mini-cover-up of the facts. In the days after the photo op, the White House first lied about the reasons for the jet flight, insisting that it was necessary because the ship was outside helicopter range. That story fell apart when it became clear that the ship was only 30 miles offshore and slowing up to give Bush an excuse to use the jet.

A later New York Times article revealed that Bush had personally collaborated on the jet landing idea and that the imagery was choreographed by a White House advance team led by communications specialist Scott Sforza, who arrived on the carrier days earlier. The carrier landing was just one scene in a deliberate pattern of images sought by the White House, the article said.

At a recent economic speech in Indianapolis, people sitting behind Bush were told to take off their ties so they'd look more like ordinary folks, WISH-TV reported. At a speech at Mount Rushmore in South Dakota, cameramen were given a platform that offered up Bush's profile as if he were already carved into the mountain with Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt. [NYT, May 16, 2003]

But the TV media and the American people shrugged off concerns about whether Bush had used the USS Abraham Lincoln and its crew as a political prop. When Democrats demanded a cost accounting, MSNBC posed its question-of-the-day this way: “President Bush's Flight Flap. Much Ado About Nothing?” [MSNBC, May 8, 2003] A New York Times/CBS News poll found 59 percent of the American people agreeing that use of the carrier was appropriate and saying that Bush was not seeking political gain.

So how did the American people reach this point where a majority doesn't mind being manipulated no matter how obvious or absurd the trickery?

Part of the answer, of course, relates to the trauma of Sept. 11 when the nation felt victimized and concluded that "united we stand" was the right strategy even if that meant giving Bush a blank check to do whatever he wanted, no matter how reckless.

### The Matrix's Origin

But a fuller explanation for this American Matrix goes back much farther – and like the Matrix in the movie – we know some but not all the facts.

The American Matrix grew out of Republican anger in the 1970s. That anger followed the leaking of the Pentagon Papers which described the secret history of the Vietnam War and the revelations about President Richard Nixon's political abuses known as Watergate. Those two disclosures helped force U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam and drove Nixon from office.

For leading Republicans, the trauma was extreme as the party was pummeled in congressional elections in 1974 and lost the White House in 1976. An influential core of wealthy conservatives decided that they needed to assert tighter control over what information reached and influenced the people.

Led by former Treasury Secretary Bill Simon and enlisting the likes of right-wing philanthropist Richard Mellon Scaife, these Republicans began pouring tens of millions of dollars into building a conservative media infrastructure to challenge the mainstream press, which the conservatives labeled "liberal." [For more background, see Consortiumnews.com's "Democrats' Dilemma."]

This political/media strategy gained momentum in the 1980s when President Ronald Reagan's image-savvy team worked closely with the emerging conservative media, such as Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Washington Times which Reagan called his "favorite" newspaper. Meanwhile, a host of conservative attack groups, such as Accuracy in Media, went after journalists who exposed embarrassing facts about Reagan's secret operations, such as the Iran-contra scandal and drug-trafficking by the Nicaraguan contras, Reagan's beloved "freedom fighters."

Conservative activists worked hand-in-glove with Reagan's "public diplomacy" apparatus, which borrowed psychological operations specialists from the U.S. military to conduct what was termed "perception management." Their goal was to manage the perceptions of the American people about key foreign-policy issues, such as Central America and the threat posed by the Soviet Union.

"The most critical special operations mission we have ... is to persuade the American people that the communists are out to get us," explained deputy assistant secretary of the Air Force, J. Michael Kelly, at a National Defense University conference.

In the 1980s, the Republicans were helped by news executives in mainstream publications who favored Reagan's hard-line foreign policy, including New York Times executive editor Abe Rosenthal. Some of these executives turned their news organizations away from the tough reporting that was needed to expose the foreign policy abuses that were occurring under Reagan.

That averting of eyes was one of the key reasons major newspapers, such as the New York Times and the Washington Post, largely missed the Iran-contra scandal and attacked the reporting of other journalists who uncovered foreign-policy crimes such as cocaine trafficking by Nicaraguan contra forces. A false reality was being created that covered up the ugly side of U.S. foreign policy. [For details, see Robert Parry's *Lost History*.]

### Clinton Wars

In the 1990s, the interests of the maturing conservative news media and the mainstream news media merged even more fully as both groups found common cause in exaggerating misconduct by President Bill Clinton. Mainstream journalists discovered that they could report sloppily about Clinton and gain the praise – rather than the opprobrium – of the well-financed conservative attack groups. [For details, see *The Hunting of the President* by Joe Conason and Gene Lyons, or Sidney Blumenthal's *The Clinton Wars*.]

Though many key facts about Clinton's Whitewater investments and other "scandals" were misrepresented by the national press, there were no punishments for the reporters involved, only rewards. By contrast, the few reporters who still had the

audacity to dig up evidence of past crimes from the Reagan-Bush era found themselves under attack and their livelihoods threatened.

For instance, when San Jose Mercury News reporter Gary Webb revived the contra-drug story in the mid-1990s, he was denounced by the New York Times and other leading newspapers that had pooh-poohed the scandal when it was unfolding in the 1980s. Even when a 1998 CIA report verified that the contras were implicated in the drug trade and that the Reagan-Bush administration had hidden the evidence, the major newspapers continued to concentrate their wrath on Webb, who was driven out of the profession. [For details, see Parry's Lost History.]

The same patterns carried over into the 2000 election in which Democrat Al Gore faced withering attacks on his credibility – often from made-up or exaggerated examples of his supposed lying – while Republican George W. Bush got pretty much a free pass. [For details, see the Consortiumnews.com's "Protecting Bush-Cheney."]

Again, the conservative and mainstream media outlets often worked in tandem, with the New York Times joining the Washington Times in misquoting Gore about “inventing” the Internet or claiming that “I was the one that started” the Love Canal toxic-waste cleanup. Again, there were no consequences for reporters who got the facts wrong. [For details, see the Consortiumnews.com's "Al Gore v. the Media."]

## Terror Attacks

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, only deepened these tendencies.

The following month, for instance, a group of news organizations completed a press recount of all legally cast votes in the pivotal presidential election in Florida. The original purpose of the recount had been simple: to determine which candidate the voters of Florida actually had picked for president based on votes considered legal under Florida law.

But the recount's outcome presented a challenge. Regardless of what standard was used for the famous chads – whether perforated, hanging or fully punched through – Al Gore was the winner by a narrow margin. In other words, if the state of Florida had been allowed to count all its legally cast ballots, George W. Bush would not be president. That finding, however,

would have certainly drawn the wrath of the administration and many Americans who were rallying around Bush in the wake of Sept. 11.

The decision of the news executives was to simply misrepresent the results. For the leads of their stories, the New York Times, CNN and other news organizations arbitrarily ignored the legal Florida ballots in which voters both marked and wrote in their choice, the so-called "over-votes."

By claiming, incorrectly, that these ballots would not have been counted in the state-court-ordered recount, which was stopped by Bush's allies on the U.S. Supreme Court, the media outlets kept up the pretense that Bush was the legitimate winner of Florida and thus the White House. Though this manipulation of the vote tally was noted by a few publications at the time, including this Web site, the false reality of Bush's Florida victory has become part of the American Matrix. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com's "So Bush Did Steal the White House."]

#### Iraq's WMD

The American Matrix grew, too, with the altering of U.S. intelligence to buttress the case for war against Iraq.

As investigative reporter Seymour Hersh discovered, a small group of neo-conservative ideologists, calling themselves the Cabal and stationed at the Pentagon's Office of Special Plans, reworked U.S. intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction to help justify a U.S. invasion. The Cabal was organized by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, an architect of Bush's policy of pre-emptive attack against perceived American enemies, Hersh wrote in an article for The New Yorker.

"Special Plans was created in order to find evidence of what Wolfowitz and his boss, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, believed to be true – that Saddam Hussein had close ties to al-Qaeda, and that Iraq had an enormous arsenal of chemical, biological, and possibly even nuclear weapons that threatened the region and, potentially, the United States," Hersh wrote, citing a Pentagon adviser who supported the Cabal's work.

Hersh also quoted a former Bush administration intelligence official as saying he quit because "they were using the intelligence from the CIA and other agencies only when it fit their agenda. They didn't like the intelligence they were getting, and so they

brought in people to write the stuff. They were so crazed and so far out and so difficult to reason with – to the point of being bizarre. Dogmatic, as if they were on a mission from God.”

Hersh found, too, that Wolfowitz and other key neo-conservatives at the Pentagon were disciples of the late political philosopher Leo Strauss, who believed that some deception of the population is necessary in statecraft. “The whole story is complicated by Strauss’s idea – actually Plato’s – that philosophers need to tell noble lies not only to the people at large but also to powerful politicians,” said Stephen Holmes, a law professor at New York University. [See The New Yorker, May 12, 2003]

While the post-Sept. 11 period was creating these new openings for the Pentagon’s Straussians to manipulate the American people, it was also offering enticing opportunities for the U.S. cable news networks to “brand” themselves in red, white and blue.

While unapologetic flag-waving journalism on cable news had been pioneered by Rupert Murdoch’s conservative Fox News network, third-ranked MSNBC seized the new opportunity with the most obvious zeal. The network, a Microsoft-General Electric collaboration, dumped war critic Phil Donahue, adopted the administration’s title for the war – “Operation Iraqi Freedom” – and emblazoned an American flag on the corner of its screens, just like Fox.

During the war, MSNBC flooded its programming with sentimental salutes to the troops, including mini-profiles of U.S. soldiers in a feature called “America’s Bravest.” The network also broadcast Madison Avenue-style promos of the war that featured images of heroic U.S. troops and happy Iraqis, without any blood-stained images of overflowing hospitals, terrified children or grieving mothers. The promos carried messages, such as “Home of the Brave” and “Let Freedom Ring.”

Reporting about U.S. military reversals during the early days of the war also brought swift reprisals. When veteran war correspondent Peter Arnett observed accurately to an Iraqi TV interviewer that Iraqi military resistance was stiffer than U.S. military planners had expected, he was fired by NBC and kicked off its MSNBC affiliate.

Web sites, such as this one, were hit with angry e-mails from readers furious at any suggestion that the war was not a total success or that the Bush administration had colored its war-fighting scenarios with dangerous wishful thinking. Even taking

note of obvious facts, such as the failure of the administration's initial "shock and awe" bombing strategy, was controversial.

### Bush Admission

Ironically, while telling these truths real-time could bring reprisals, Bush himself acknowledged their accuracy later.

"Shock and awe said to many people that all we've got to do is unleash some might and people will crumble," Bush said in an interview with NBC's Tom Brokaw. "And it turns out the fighters were a lot fiercer than we thought. ...The resistance for our troops moving south and north was significant resistance." [NBC Nightly News interview, released April 25, 2003]

As craven as the U.S. media's behavior may have been, flag-waving journalism worked where it counts – in the ratings race.

While MSNBC remained in third place among U.S. cable news outlets, it posted the highest ratings growth in the lead-up to war and during the actual fighting, up 124 percent compared with a year earlier. Fox News, the industry leader, racked up a 102 percent gain and No. 2 CNN rose 91 percent. [WSJ, April 21, 2003]

Though some Americans switched to BBC or CNN's international channels to find more objective war coverage, large numbers of Americans clearly wanted the "feel-good" nationalism of Fox News and MSNBC. Images of U.S. troops surrounded by smiling Iraqi children were more appealing than knowing the full truth.

The full story of the Iraq War demanded unsettling judgments about the slaughter of thousands of Iraqis and the maiming of children, like the 12-year-old boy who lost both his arms and his family to a U.S. bombing attack. Balanced coverage would have recognized that many Iraqis reacted with coldness and hostility to U.S. forces, a harbinger of the Iraqi resistance that's now killing an average of one or two U.S. soldiers a day.

To some foreigners, the uniformity in the U.S. war coverage had the feel of a totalitarian state.

"There have been times, living in America of late, when it seemed I was back in the Communist Moscow I left a dozen years ago," wrote Rupert Cornwell in the London-based Independent. "Switch to cable TV and reporters breathlessly relay the latest wisdom from the usual unnamed 'senior administration officials,' keeping us on the straight and narrow. Everyone, it seems, is

on-side and on-message. Just like it used to be when the hammer and sickle flew over the Kremlin.”

Cornwell traced this lock-step U.S. coverage to the influence of Fox News, which “has taken its cue from George Bush’s view of the universe post-11 September – either you’re with us or against us. Fox, most emphatically, is with him, and it’s paid off at the box office. Not for Fox to dwell on uncomfortable realities like collateral damage, Iraqi casualties, or the failure of the U.S. troops to protect libraries and museums.” [Independent, April 23, 2003]

### Punishing Dissent

But the U.S. cable news networks and talk radio went beyond simply boosting the war. They often served as the Bush administration’s public enforcers, seeking out and destroying Americans who disagreed with the war policy.

Because one of the Dixie Chicks criticized Bush, the music group has faced an organized campaign to boycott their music and destroy their careers. MSNBC offered up a program hosted by Republican commentator Joe Scarborough asking why actors Sean Penn and Tim Robbins, who criticized the war, are now whining about retaliation.

“Sean Penn is fired from an acting job and finds out that actions bring about consequences. Whoa, dude!” chortled Scarborough.

As justification for depriving Penn of work, Scarborough cited a comment that Penn made while on a pre-war trip to Iraq. Penn said, “I cannot conceive of any reason why the American people and the world would not have shared with them the evidence that they claim to have of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.” [MSNBC transcript, May 18, 2003]

As it turned out, Penn’s pre-war comments would be equally valid today, with the U.S. and Great Britain desperately seeking that WMD evidence.

In their defense, many news executives might argue that their jobs go beyond simply telling the American people the truth. They also are concerned about national unity, especially at a time of crisis. And they don’t want to be accused of undercutting U.S. troops at war.

Yet, there is a grave danger to both troops and civilians when the news media sanitizes war. By keeping unpleasant images from the American people, the news media feeds the illusion that war is painless, even fun, something to be engaged in easily over slight or imagined provocation. This sort of lazy thinking gets people killed and can squander the wealth of the most powerful nations.

### Truth Delayed

Among U.S. politicians, Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., has been the most forceful in addressing the dangers to democracy and to U.S. troops that comes from pervasive government lying.

“No matter to what lengths we humans may go to obfuscate facts or delude our fellows, truth has a way of squeezing out through the cracks, eventually,” Byrd said on the Senate floor on May 21. “But the danger is that at some point it may no longer matter. The danger is that damage is done before the truth is widely realized. The reality is that, sometimes, it is easier to ignore uncomfortable facts and go along with whatever distortion is currently in vogue.”

Byrd continued, “Regarding the situation in Iraq, it appears to this senator that the American people may have been lured into accepting the unprovoked invasion of a sovereign nation, in violation of long-standing international law, under false pretenses. ... The run up to our invasion of Iraq featured the president and members of his Cabinet invoking every frightening image they could conjure, from mushroom clouds, to buried caches of germ warfare, to drones poised to deliver germ-laden death in our major cities. ...

“The tactic was guaranteed to provoke a sure reaction from a nation still suffering from a combination of post traumatic stress and justifiable anger after the attacks of 9-11. It was the exploitation of fear. It was a placebo for the anger. ...

“Presently our loyal military personnel continue their mission of diligently searching for WMD. They have so far turned up only fertilizer, vacuum cleaners, conventional weapons and the occasional buried swimming pool. They are misused on such a mission and they continue to be at grave risk,” Byrd said.

“But the Bush team’s extensive hype of WMD in Iraq as justification for a pre-emptive invasion has become more than

embarrassing,” the aging West Virginia senator continued. “It has raised serious questions about prevarication and the reckless use of power. Were our troops needlessly put at risk? Were countless Iraqi civilians killed and maimed when war was not really necessary? Was the American public deliberately misled? Was the world?” [Full text.]

Right now, a far more vigorous examination of these questions is underway in Europe, where leading politicians and journalists are questioning the pre-war claims of Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

“We were told that Saddam had weapons ready for use within 45 minutes,” declared former British Foreign Minister Robin Cook, who resigned over Blair’s pro-war policies. “It’s now 45 days since the war has finished and we have still not found anything.”

Paul Keetch, defense spokesman for a British opposition party, the Liberal Democrats, said, “No weapons means no threat. Without WMD, the case for war falls apart. It would seem either the intelligence was wrong and we should not rely on it, or the politicians overplayed the threat.” [Independent, May 29, 2003]

BBC News quoted a senior British intelligence official as saying that a dossier that Blair’s government compiled about Iraq’s alleged WMD program was rewritten to make it “sexier,” including the addition of a dubious claim that the Iraqis were prepared to launch a WMD strike within 45 minutes.

“It was included in the dossier against our wishes because it wasn’t reliable,” the official said. “Most things in the dossier were double source but that was single source and we believe the source was wrong.” [BBC News, May 29, 2003]

The world’s press also has pounced on admissions by senior U.S. officials conceding that the pre-war WMD claims may have been hyped.

In a speech in New York, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld said it is “possible that they [the Iraqis] decided that they would destroy them prior to a conflict and I don’t know the answer.” In an interview with Vanity Fair, Deputy Defense Secretary Wolfowitz said the WMD allegation was stressed “for bureaucratic reasons” because “it was the one reason everyone could agree on.”

Lt. Gen. James Conway, who commanded the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, told reporters that “it remains a surprise to me

that we have not uncovered (chemical) weapons ... in some of the forward dispersal areas” where U.S. intelligence claimed they were ready for use by Iraq’s Republican Guards. “We were simply wrong,” Conway said.

### Destroying the Matrix

As with the Matrix of the movies, the first step toward destroying this American Matrix will be for the people to get a fuller understanding of the truth, even if that truth is difficult and unpleasant. Why that first step has been so difficult, however, is that there exist too few U.S. news outlets that will challenge the powers-that-be.

Longer-term challenges to the American Matrix may come simply from the grinding logic of budgetary policies. In less than three years in office, Bush has dug a budget hole so deep that an expected \$5.6 trillion surplus over a 10-year period from 2002 to 2011 has been transformed into a projected \$3.6 trillion deficit, a \$9 trillion reversal of black ink to red ink. [Washington Post, May 31, 2003]

The U.S. budget surplus was expected to help pay retirement costs for the Baby Boom generation, but now a fiscal train wreck seems increasingly unavoidable.

The failure of Bush’s policies to create new jobs may be another wake-up call to Americans. Since Bush took office, the U.S. economy has shed more than two million jobs, leaving about 9.2 million Americans out of work.

“The U.S. is experiencing the most protracted job-market downturn since the Great Depression,” wrote the Wall Street Journal. “It has left behind a remarkably broad swath of workers – from young to old, and from high-school dropouts to the highly educated.” [WSJ, May 29, 2003]

Those lucky enough to find new jobs often are forced to take steep pay cuts, as are many who manage to hold onto their old jobs, Time magazine reported.

“The net result of the various pressures on pay: in the first three months of 2003, median weekly earnings adjusted for inflation fell 1.5 percent, according to the U.S. Labor Department,” Time wrote. “Wage erosion partly explains why the Federal Reserve Board openly frets about the threat of deflation, a downward spiral in prices that can cripple an economy.” [Time, May 26,

2003]

If the American people are armed with more facts, they may be able to start seeing through the manipulative reality of feel-good war images. Possibly that change, if rapid enough, could spare the nation from the most devastating of political and economic consequences.

Yet without a major investment of resources and talent in honest news media now, the American Matrix may remain the only reality that most Americans ever will know.

While at the Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s, Robert Parry broke many of the stories now known as the Iran-Contra Affair. His latest book is Lost History.