

# Bush's hollow narrative on Iraq

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workingforchange.com | September 17, 2004

**T**he occupation of Iraq is spiraling out of control, averaging more than three US deaths a day since the beginning of September. Yet despite the cascading bad news – the US casualty count has jumped from 1,000 on the morning of September 7 to 1,029 at press time – President Bush is steadfastly sticking to his narrative. The occupation of Iraq is muddled, confused, and messy and the prospects for the future are bleak. That isn't spin from the DNC's latest press release. It's the current assessment of two highly-respected Republican Senators and the conclusion of a highly-classified report produced by the National Intelligence Council that, according to The New York Times, forecast "a dark assortment of prospects for Iraq."

Election 2004, like most modern political campaigns, is a battle of narratives. Which candidate has a more compelling personal story? Which candidate has the "It" factor – charisma and likeability? Which candidate's policies resonate with a majority of the American people? Which candidate has character and integrity and will tell Americans the hard truths? Which candidate has a plan for extricating the US from the quagmire of Iraq?

For the Bush/Cheney campaign, the narrative has been boiled down to a very simple message that is powered by fear and the oft-hyped specter of another terrorist attack on the homeland and is repeated incessantly. It's a two-headed hydra: Only the president is equipped to "finish the job" in Iraq, and only the president can secure the homeland against another terrorist attack.

In this narrative, the war in Iraq and the war against terrorism have become synonymous. Although it wasn't that way before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, due to a remarkable effort on the part of the Bush Administration, Iraq and terrorism are now intimately connected.

So tear yourself away from news of Hurricane Ivan, the premiere episode of Survivor, baseball's late season pennant races and the upcoming Miss America pageant. Get your mind off the gaps in President Bush's Texas Air National Guard service record or whether Dan Rather's documents were doctored or not. Focus on this one question and this one

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question only: How is it possible – given the ongoing chaos, carnage and devastation in Iraq – that the Bush Administration is able to continue selling its disastrous policy to the American people?

To those paying attention to developments in Iraq, the Bush/Cheney narrative is clearly terribly flawed. Even those not paying close attention must be a little suspicious by now. Team Bush's house of cards is collapsing, yet recent polls continue to find a receptive audience for his Iraq narrative. When asked who they think is better equipped to deal with future operations in that country, a majority of Americans remain convinced that it's President Bush.

### **It's the optimistic narrative stupid!**

Team Bush has created a story about Iraq, and regardless of the facts, they are the “optimistic” warriors.

The failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, and the lack of evidence of any link between Saddam Hussein and 9/11 doesn't matter much at this point. Bush's vow to capture or kill Osama bin Laden has been relegated to a historical sound-bite. The outrage over the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison has faded with each passing day. They have all become what vice president Dick Cheney recently described as a few expected “bumps along the way.”

Team Bush is sticking with its story regardless of how many US service members are killed in Iraq; no matter how many wounded are evacuated to hospitals in Germany and stateside; no matter how many times UN Secretary General Kofi Annan dares call the invasion of Iraq an illegal act.

Regardless of how many Iraqis are killed by suicide bombers or US air attacks, or how many oil pipelines are destroyed, or how many foreign nationals are kidnapped and beheaded, or how many government officials are assassinated, Team Bush is sticking to its story.

And instead of re-examining the facts, this bunch lashes out at the messenger. Under the guidance of Karl Rove, the Bush/Cheney campaign has mastered the politics of personal dissection: The cherry you see on top of the administration's Iraq narrative is Sen. John Kerry.

The successful engineering – and the concomitant soaking up of precious air time – of a series of attacks on Sen. Kerry has defined him as a “flip flopper” on Iraq and questioned his heroic service record in Vietnam. GOP surrogates have charged him with embellishing his military record, while some claim that his anti-war activism after he returned from Vietnam sold out his brothers in arms. And in what was meant as a death blow to his candidacy, vice president Cheney warned that a John Kerry victory would presage another

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terrorist attack on the homeland.

### **Muddled, confused and chaotic**

When State Department officials appeared before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee this week to request a transfer of some \$3.5 million in reconstruction funds to security needs, Sen. Richard Lugar, the chairman of the committee, criticized what he called "blindly optimistic people" inside and outside the Bush administration. According to WISH-TV in Indianapolis, Lugar called the Bush administration's handling of Iraq reconstruction an "emergency problem."

Nebraska Republican Senator Chuck Hagel pointed out that the situation in Iraq is deteriorating. Hagel said the shift in funds "does not add up in my opinion to a pretty picture, to a picture that shows that we're winning. But it does add up to this: an acknowledgment that we are in deep trouble."

The highly-classified National Intelligence Estimate, "which represents a consensus judgment of U.S. intelligence agencies," Salon magazine pointed out, was the first report on Iraq put together by the National Intelligence Council since October 2002. It was approved by the National Foreign Intelligence Board under acting CIA Director John McLaughlin. Prepared before the recent escalation of hostilities in Iraq, the nearly 50-page report took a look at the political, economic and security situation and concluded that there were three possible outcomes: At best the situation would be tenuous in terms of stability, a U.S. official speaking on the condition of anonymity told the Boston Globe. At worst, the official said, there were "trend lines that would point to a civil war."

Retired general William Odom, former head of the National Security Agency, recently said: "Bush hasn't found the WMD. Al-Qaeda, it's worse, he's lost on that front. That he's going to achieve a democracy there? That goal is lost, too." He adds: "Right now, the course we're on, we're achieving Bin Laden's ends."

Retired general Joseph Hoare, a former Marine commandant and head of US Central Command, said: "The idea that this is going to go the way these guys planned is ludicrous. There are no good options. We're conducting a campaign as though it were being conducted in Iowa, no sense of the realities on the ground."

If you've made a horrendous mistake, or a series "miscalculations," as President Bush grudgingly put it recently, would you: A) Continue along the path you're going, claiming that steadfastness in the defense of a failed occupation is a virtue; or B) Would you try to come up with some new thinking about how best to extricate yourself from the untenable situation?

This is the decision facing President Bush, and as we head into the homestretch of Election 2004 it is also the decision facing the American voter. Regardless of how many

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miscalculations it has made about Iraq, Team Bush will never admit it has been wrong. Never having to say you're sorry has been its four year modus operandi. Ignoring current pessimistic assessments is now also seen as a virtue. Sen. Kerry's job from here on is simple: Hammer away at this policy failure. He should call for a full disclosure of the National Intelligence Estimate.