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Many a jest is spoken as truth

National Public Radio deserves credit for finally airing a candid summary of how media spin works at the top of the Executive Branch.

In late May, listeners across the country heard: "Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesperson, announced that he would be leaving his post sometime this summer. When asked why, Mr. Fleischer denied he would be leaving his post. When reminded that he had just said he was leaving his post, he denied that he had. Then he shouted, 'Look over there! It's Dick Cheney eating lasagna!' and ducked out of the room."

The announcer was Peter Sagal, host of NPR's weekly news quiz show "Wait Wait ... Don't Tell Me," doing a brief promo shtick for the satirical program – illustrating, in the process, that when truth is spoken on large networks it's apt to be in jest.

But there's little meaningful jesting to be found in the mass-media world, where deception is serious business. While news reporting from the White House consists largely of stenographic treacle, such work appears to make shameless correspondents swell with professional pride.

As Fleischer has shown, masterful machinations from podiums win so much reverential coverage that the exceptional hard-hitting news reports get lost in the spin-control cycle. Overachievers in the political field of "perception management" have combined tragedy and farce into an ongoing single entity of governance.

Avoidable tragedies – whether in Baghdad or in unemployment lines back in the USA – are successfully marketed as unfortunate but acceptable necessities. Flag-lapel-waving emptied suits on television push the envelopes of obsequious deference to huge economic and political power structures.

At the same time that eager apologists for a status quo of militarism and corporate domination are appalling to people with more humanistic values, the criticisms tend to be much less caustic than warranted. The pretensions and pieties of national leaders merit an outpouring of derision and scorn.

Consider the heads of state in Washington and London, now presiding over the oh-

so-slow installation of U.S.-selected Iraqi "leaders." After inflicting the horrors of war on so many people, George W. Bush and Tony Blair feel compelled to preen themselves as champions of freedom, even as the Bush administration makes sure that only the slightest trappings of democracy will emerge in U.S.-run Iraq.

In the name of democracy, top U.S. officials will handpick the acceptable Iraqi faces to plaster on a new regime of American creation. And the media war drums are beating for Iran, perhaps the next beneficiary of U.S. concern.

With some notable exceptions, journalists at major U.S. news outlets tell us that President Bush has no need to come up with any of the "weapons of mass destruction" that he swore up and down were in the possession of Saddam Hussein at the start of the war. The self-fulfilling media verdict is that the pre-war mendacity of the Bush administration doesn't matter politically in the United States.

In his March 17 speech, on the eve of launching the war, Bush declared: "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." Where are the outcries from journalists calling the Bush regime to account for such statements?

It's hardly a sign of mental health that we don't keel over with derisive laughter or apoplexy when hearing the latest to-be-received wisdom from media performers such as Bush, Dan Rather, Bill O'Reilly and Thomas Friedman. The excessively respectful treatment accorded them is part of the insidious overall pattern that confers credibility on the incredible and bestows routine respect on flagrant manipulators in very high places.

At a time when schools, health care facilities and a wide range of other public services are being drastically curtailed or even decimated in communities across the country, the U.S. government has boosted its military spending to well over a billion dollars per day. War industries are flourishing, while egregious economic inequities grow even more extreme. But few high-profile journalists have indicated much willingness to swim against the mainstream tide. ■