



OP-ED COLUMNIST

Oh What a Malleable War

By FRANK RICH
Published: February 18, 2007

MAYBE the Bush White House can't conduct a war, but no one has ever impugned its ability to lie about its conduct of a war. Now even that well-earned reputation for flawless fictionalizing is coming undone. Watching the administration try to get its story straight about Iran's role in Iraq last week was like watching third graders try to sidestep blame for misbehaving while the substitute teacher was on a bathroom break. The team that once sold the country smoking guns in the shape of mushroom clouds has completely lost its mojo.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times
Frank Rich.

Surely these guys can do better than this. No sooner did unnamed military officials unveil their melodramatically [secretive briefing in Baghdad](#) last Sunday than Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, blew the whole charade. General Pace said [he didn't know about the briefing](#) and couldn't endorse its contention that the Iranian government's highest echelons were complicit in anti-American hostilities in Iraq. Public-relations pandemonium ensued as [Tony Snow](#), [the State Department](#) and finally [the president](#) tried to revise the story line on the fly. Back when Karl Rove ruled, everyone read verbatim from the same script. Last week's frantic improvisations were vintage Scooter Libby, at best the ur-text for a future perjury trial.

Yet for all the sloppy internal contradictions, the most incriminating indictment of the new White House disinformation campaign is to be found in official assertions made more than a year ago. The press and everyone else seems to have forgotten that the administration has twice sounded the same alarms about Iranian weaponry in Iraq that it did last week.

In August 2005, NBC News, CBS News and [The Times](#) cited unnamed military and intelligence officials when reporting, as CBS put it, that "U.S. forces intercepted a shipment from Iran containing professionally made explosive devices specifically designed to penetrate the armor which protects American vehicles." Then, as now, those devices were the devastating roadside bombs currently called E.F.P.'s (explosively formed penetrators). Then, as now, they were thought to have been brought into Iraq by members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard. Then, as now, there was no evidence that the Iranian

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Barry Blitt

government was directly involved. In February 2006, administration officials delivered [the same warning](#) yet again, before the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Timing is everything in propaganda, as in all showmanship. So why would the White House pick this particular moment to mount such an extravagant rerun of old news, [complete with photos](#) and props reminiscent of

Colin Powell's infamous presentation of prewar intelligence? Yes, the death toll from these bombs is [rising](#), but it has been rising for some time. (Also rising, and more dramatically, is the death toll from [attacks on American helicopters](#).)

After General Pace rendered inoperative the first official rationale for last Sunday's E.F.P. briefing, President Bush had to find a new explanation for his sudden focus on the Iranian explosives. That's why he said at [Wednesday's news conference](#) that it no longer mattered whether the Iranian government (as opposed to black marketeers or freelance thugs) had supplied these weapons to Iraqi killers. "What matters is, is that they're there," he said. The real point of hyping this inexact intelligence was to justify why he had to take urgent action now, no matter what the E.F.P.'s provenance: "My job is to protect our troops. And when we find devices that are in that country that are hurting our troops, we're going to do something about it, pure and simple."

Darn right! But if the administration has warned about these weapons twice in the past 18 months (and had known "that they're there," we now know, since 2003), why is Mr. Bush just stepping up to that job at this late date? Embarrassingly enough, [The Washington Post reported on its front page](#) last Monday — the same front page with news of the Baghdad E.F.P. briefing — that there is now a shortfall of "thousands of advanced Humvee armor kits designed to reduce U.S. troop deaths from roadside bombs." Worse, the full armor upgrade "is not scheduled to be completed until this summer." So Mr. Bush's idea of doing something about it, "pure and simple" is itself a lie, since he is doing something about it only after he has knowingly sent a new round of underarmored American troops into battle.

To those who are most suspicious of this White House, the "something" that Mr. Bush really wants to do has little to do with armor in any case. His real aim is to provoke war with Iran, no matter how overstretched and ill-equipped our armed forces may be for that added burden. By this line of thinking, the run-up to the war in Iraq is now repeating itself exactly and Mr. Bush will seize any handy casus belli he can to ignite a conflagration in Iran.

Iran is an unquestionable menace with an Israel-hating fanatic as its president. It is also four times the size of Iraq and a far more dangerous adversary than was Saddam's regime. Perhaps Mr. Bush is as reckless as his harshest critics claim and will double down on catastrophe. But for those who don't hold quite so pitch-black a view of his intentions, there's a less apocalyptic motive to be considered as well.

Let's not forget that the White House's stunt of repackaging old, fear-inducing news for public consumption has a long track record. Its reason for doing so is always the same: to distract the public from reality that runs counter to the White House's political interests. When the Democrats were gaining campaign traction in 2004, John Ashcroft held an [urgent news conference](#) to display [photos](#) of seven suspected terrorists on the loose. He didn't bother to explain that six of them had been announced previously, one at a news conference he had held [28 months earlier](#). Mr. Bush played the same trick last February as [newly declassified statistics](#) at a Senate hearing revealed a steady three-year growth in insurgent attacks: he [breathlessly announced a thwarted Qaeda plot](#) against

the U.S. Bank Tower in Los Angeles that had [already been revealed](#) by the administration four months before.

We know what Mr. Bush wants to distract us from this time: Congressional votes [against his war policy](#), the Libby trial, the Pentagon inspector general's report deploring [Douglas Feith's fictional prewar intelligence](#), and the new and dire National Intelligence Estimate saying that America is sending troops into the cross-fire of a multifaceted sectarian cataclysm.

That same intelligence estimate also says that Iran is “not likely to be a major driver of violence” in Iraq, but no matter. If the president can now whip up a Feith-style smoke screen of innuendo to imply that Iran is the root of all our woes in the war — and give “the enemy” a single recognizable face (Ahmadinejad as the new Saddam) — then, ipso facto, he is not guilty of sending troops into the middle of a shadowy Sunni-Shiite bloodbath after all.

Oh what a malleable war Iraq has been. First it was waged to vanquish Saddam's (nonexistent) nuclear arsenal and his (nonexistent) collaboration with Al Qaeda. Then it was going to spread (nonexistent) democracy throughout the Middle East. Now it is being rebranded as a fight against Tehran. Mr. Bush keeps saying that his saber rattling about Iran is not “a pretext for war.” Maybe so, but at the very least it's a pretext for prolonging the disastrous war we already have.

What makes his spin brazen even by his standards is that Iran is in fact steadily extending its influence in Iraq — thanks to its alliance with the very Iraqi politicians that Mr. Bush himself has endorsed. In December the president welcomed a Shiite leader, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, to the White House [with great fanfare](#); just three weeks later American forces had to raid Mr. Hakim's Iraq compound to [arrest Iranian operatives](#) suspected of planning attacks against American military forces, possibly with E.F.P.'s. As if that weren't bad enough, Nuri al-Maliki's government [promptly overruled the American arrests](#) and ordered the operatives' release so they could escape to Iran. For all his bluster about doing something about it, Mr. Bush did nothing.

It gets worse. This month we learned that yet another Maliki supporter in the Iraqi Parliament, Jamal Jafaar Mohammed Ali Ebrahimi, was [convicted more than two decades ago](#) of planning the murderous 1983 attacks on the American and French Embassies in Kuwait. He's now in Iran, but before leaving, this terrorist served as a security adviser, no less, to the first Iraqi prime minister after the American invasion, Ibrahim al-Jafaari. Mr. Jafaari, hailed by Mr. Bush as “a strong partner for peace and freedom” during [his own White House visit in 2005](#), could be found last week [in Tehran](#), celebrating the anniversary of the 1979 Iranian revolution and criticizing America's arrest of Iranian officials in Iraq.

Even if the White House still had its touch for spinning fiction, it's hard to imagine how it could create new lies brilliant enough to top the sorry truth. When you have a president making a big show of berating Iran while simultaneously empowering it, you've got another remake of “The Manchurian Candidate,” this time played for keeps.

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