

The Great Deception

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A STORY IS TOLD that takes place in a park in Moscow during the Soviet era. A man walks about, handing out sheets of what looks like a newsletter to Muscovites sitting on park benches. Two security officers notice and walk up to the man. They grab the batch of sheets from his hands.

“They’re blank!” the officers exclaim incredulously as they leaf through the papers. “What is the meaning of this?”

“But everybody knows,” the man replies.

Everybody knows, too, in America today. Almost four years after President George W. Bush invaded Iraq, the reality of what was done first in the name of protecting the United States from a mushroom cloud and then in the name of democracy has become all too clear—except to those few still hypnotized by the administration’s rhetoric. The verdict, now often written and spoken, is captured in book titles like Thomas Ricks’s *Fiasco*. It is plainly evident in the findings of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group’s report on the war: “The situation in Iraq is grave and deteriorating.” It is not obscured by the administration’s announcement of a “new way forward.”

How it took so long to get to the point at which the reality of Iraq is expressed so bluntly and understood so widely is a story of how the Bush administration manufactured its own reality and then fell hostage to it. It is a story of how the traditional press watchdogs became entangled in questions of patriotism and fears of power and thus both missed and misidentified what was happening. As Frank Rich aptly suggests with the title of his book, it is one of the greatest stories ever sold.

Beginning with 9-11, a new way of thinking and a new way of portraying events formed a new contemporary narrative. That would be expected

with any historically rupturing event, especially an act of war. This new way of seeing would not even be especially contentious, since most of the population agreed with the perception; indeed, in the days after September 11, much of the world saw 9-11 as most Americans did. The United States was the victim, and as such had a right to retaliate. This narrative became the major thread by which events were measured, most notably the decision to remove the Taliban in Afghanistan and destroy Al Qaeda’s sanctuary.

The Bush administration hijacked the narrative, however, with the decision to invade Iraq. Placing the invasion in the context of the “global war on terror” meant that Iraq would be viewed as the next campaign in a war that had already toppled Afghanistan. Then the “real men” would take Tehran (“Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran,” said a British official in 2003) and Damascus later. The Middle East would be America’s, and the resulting spread of democracy would drown any incentive for the region’s youth to find common cause with Al Qaeda.

This 180-proof version of the world to come, with its emphasis on unilateral military might and unilateral American diplomacy, required domestically not only a public and a press suffused with post-9-11 thinking but also a stick, a form of coercion, to bring into line those who might greet this brave new world with skepticism or criticism or, worst of all, political opposition. The coercion came in the form of a sturdy American standby—patriotism—which featured as its premise the standard President Bush had articulated in the days after 9-11: those who are not with us are against us.

THE NARRATIVE PUNCTURED

The dominant narrative that the Bush administration crafted for Iraq proved extraordinarily

The Greatest Story Ever Sold
by Frank Rich. Penguin, 2006.

The Iraq Study Group Report
James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton,
chairs. US Institute of Peace, 2006.

**Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in
the Middle East, 1776 to the Present**
by Michael B. Oren. Norton, 2007.

State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III
by Bob Woodward. Simon and Schuster, 2006.

powerful. The White House used it deftly to maneuver its way to a second term in 2004 even as media reports from Iraq began to form, piecemeal, a picture of life in Iraq that was nasty, brutish, and short for growing numbers of the American occupiers and the liberated Iraqis. The administration's narrative has only been fully punctured in recent months, in part with the publication of books like those by Frank Rich and Bob Woodward (the latter, along with Ricks's *Fiasco* and Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone*, forming a triple play by *Washington Post* reporters).

That "everyone knows" the reality of Iraq became apparent with the Republican loss of the Senate and House in the November midterm elections. And early December saw the publication of the report by the Iraq Study Group, chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker, a long-time Republican political "fixer," and a well-known former US representative, Democrat Lee Hamilton.

Since the political elders finally have spoken, it is now Bush and his "dead-ender" supporters, not the war's critics, who are in opposition. A new narrative is emerging with the new truthfulness.

THE SELLING OF THE WAR

Rich, a *New York Times* columnist, provides a keen metanarrative on the Iraq War reality that the Bush administration both believed and wanted the rest of the country to believe, in contrast with, well, the real reality of the war. His analysis is especially insightful because he understands what the Bush administration understood so well: this was a media-mediated war ("perception was all, and perception began with images on television"). *The Greatest Story Ever Sold* is a dissection of the administration's creation, nurturing, and feeding of the desired perceptions. These are juxtaposed with what was happening at the moment; a hefty appendix includes a time line of major events as narrated by the Bush administration and contrasting reports from the "reality-based" community.

The White House's greatest hits are all here, from Secretary of State Colin Powell's riveting but bogus UN presentation to Bush's golden moment in the sun as he landed in a military jet on the *Abraham Lincoln* and then strode across the ship's deck

in a fighter pilot's uniform. Rich captures the perfectly crafted stage setting that accompanied the president's address on the carrier later that day, in which he declared the war in Iraq all but over: "The president's speech came precisely at dusk in the west—Hollywood's so-called magic hour, much prized by cinematographers for the golden glow it bestows on any scene. . . . A banner with the simple message 'Mission Accomplished' was posted high up so that it appeared as a halo hovering over the president, much as the Statue of Liberty had appeared at Bush's 9-11 anniversary speech as the war's rollout began. The ranks of crew members who served as Bush's official audience and backdrop were in color-coordinated costumes as bright as the future."

The Greatest Story Ever Sold is easily this generation's *The Selling of the President*. What was novel in 1968 is now *de rigueur* when it comes to politics. But have we learned nothing in the intervening decades? If the American people

knew they were being sold a product—in this case, war—why did they not more carefully consider the purchase? Rich offers an answer that works if applied to the mass of Americans: they trusted the president, and they fell for the story because it was so well done.

Members of the impressionable public were not the only ones to succumb to the story. As Rich notes, Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and the rest of the administration "made the same tragic error of all propagandists who come to ruin: they fell for their own scam." Rich does not lean too heavily on this explanation, however; he generally suggests the war was a deliberate deception on the part of the administration. While that is no doubt true when it comes to how the White House has spun the bloody chaos that has descended on Iraq over the past three years, it is too harsh an indictment of the original decision to sell the Iraq War. Bush and Cheney truly believed. In an interview on the PBS program *Frontline*, James Dobbins, a former State Department official now at the RAND Corporation, said of the administration's creation of the rationale for war, "I didn't consider it so much a case of deception as self-deception. That is, first they deceived themselves, and then they deceived everyone else."

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Self-deception explains why Cheney, according to Woodward, obsessively interrogated David Kay, the man responsible for finding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq after the invasion. Where were the missing WMD, Cheney demanded to know: in Syria? Lebanon? Self-deception also explains why, to this day, Bush still finds it impossible to face reality in Iraq, why he continues to mouth talking points like “we’re winning” and “it’s hard work” without ever once leveling with the American people about the scope and the scale of the calamity.

NO MAGIC FORMULA

In this respect, the Iraq Study Group report represents less a new analysis of the war than a last-ditch effort to dislodge Bush from the mental cocoon he has retreated into when it comes to Iraq. “There is no magic formula to solve the problems of Iraq,” the report announces. “Despite a massive effort, stability in Iraq remains elusive, and the situation is deteriorating.” The landscape sketched is dark. For the United States, 3,000 dead soldiers and more than 22,000 wounded. War costs have reached \$400 billion and are running at \$8 billion a month; \$2 trillion is not too large an estimate of the war’s ultimate cost. For Iraqis, the reality is death and destruction, rather than reconstruction; 3,000 killed each month in the sectarian violence that has consumed much of the country; 1.6 million Iraqis internally displaced, and 1.8 million refugees in neighboring nations, with 100,000 a month feeding that flow.

The report offers 79 recommendations on how the United States should work to put Iraq into good enough shape so that US troops can leave. Talk to the neighbors, including Iran and Syria. Talk to the major powerholders, including the Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr. Create the conditions for a conference on national reconciliation. Use the US military to strengthen the Iraqi military rather than fight for it. Dismantle the militias that wield power.

The recommendations are eminently sensible. It is unclear, however, if they are workable. The report places huge hopes on the Iraqi government, yet this is a government in name only. As the report makes explicit, the national leadership in Baghdad cannot provide security to the capital, let alone the rest of the country. By not providing security, the government has failed its essential function, ensuring that little good can happen. Sectarian militias

today provide the only security that works. Reconciliation? The prevailing attitude among Shiites and Sunnis is reflected in the words of an Iraqi caught in the violence and quoted in *The Washington Post*: “If I catch a terrorist, I will not kill him with a weapon. I will not turn him over to the government. I’ll catch him and cut him to pieces and drink his blood until the last drop.”

The Iraq Study Group report may prove, in the end, little more than a political document providing the foundation for a decent interval before US troops leave Iraq. How long that time will be is unclear. The US ambassador to South Vietnam, Ellsworth Bunker, noted in May 1973, as he left Saigon with the end of American involvement in that war, that the “tunnel was longer and the light was dimmer and farther away than any of us realized at the time I came here.”

Unlike Vietnam, the United States will remain entangled in Iraq and the Middle East even after US troops leave. In his new history of American involvement in the Middle East, the military historian Michael Oren shows just how entwined the United States has been in that region since the early days of the republic. Power, faith, and fantasy are, Oren argues, the three themes that have driven America’s relationship with the Middle East since its first encounter in 1784. They define it today also. In fact, there is no more apt summation of what drove Bush and a small group of advisers to invade Iraq in April 2003. Power was always an element: the need to show that America was strong, that it could hit back hard in the very heartland of the Muslim world after the terror attacks of 9-11. Faith: the belief that the American creed, the democratic ethos, could be implanted in Iraq where it would, like a shining city on the hill, illuminate and lift up the rest of the Middle East. And fantasy: the idea that, with Saddam Hussein removed from power, all of Iraq would function like a modern state once it was given the chance to put in place democratic institutions.

Today the world’s most powerful nation stands nearly powerless in Iraq, unable to win in any meaningful sense and unable to withdraw without admitting defeat. Faith is but an ideological mindset, abetted by a refusal to face the truth, which drives the president and his administration “dead-enders” to believe, as Bush put it recently, that victory is possible in Iraq. Magic? There is none. Only nightmares, an inferno that rivals Dante’s. ■