

Stephen Eric Bronner

American Landscape: Lies, Fears, and the Distortion of Democracy

by
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Lying has always been part of politics. Traditionally, however, the lie was seen as a necessary evil that those in power should keep from their subjects. Even totalitarians tried to hide the brutal truths on which their regimes rested. This disparity gave critics and reformers their sense of purpose: to illuminate for citizens the difference between the way the world appeared and the way it actually functioned. In the aftermath of the Iraqi War, however, that sense of purpose has become imperiled along with the trust necessary for maintaining a democratic discourse. The Bush administration has boldly proclaimed the legitimacy of the lie, the irrelevance of trust, while the mainstream media has essentially looked the other way.

Not since the days of Senator Joseph McCarthy has such purposeful misrepresentation, such blatant lying, permeated the political culture of the United States. It has now become clear to all except the most stubborn that the justification for war against Iraq was not simply based on “mistaken” interpretations, or “false data,” but on sheer mendacity. Current discussions among politicians and investigators focus almost exclusively on the false assertion made in sixteen words of a presidential speech that Saddam sought to buy uranium for his weapons of mass destruction in Africa. The forest has already been lost for the trees. It has all become a matter of faulty intelligence by subordinates rather than purposeful lying by those in authority. CIA officials have, however, openly stated that they were pressured to make their research results support governmental policy. Secretary of State Colin Powell has still not substantiated claims concerning the existence of weapons of mass destruction that he made in his famous speech to the United Nations. Other important members of the Bush inner circle have openly admitted that the threat posed by Iraq was grossly exaggerated even though emphasizing it served to build a consensus for war. They have nonchalantly verified what critics have always known: that American policy was propelled by thoughts of

an Iraqi nation “swimming in oil,” control over four rivers in an arid region, throwing the fear of the western God into Teheran and Damascus, and establishing an alternative military presence to what once existed in Saudi Arabia. The Bush administration has chastised none of them and criticisms by politicians stemming from the Democratic Party have been tempered to the point of insignificance. “Leaders” of the so-called opposition party obviously fear being branded disloyal.

As they quake in their boots and wring their hands, however, issues concerning the broader justification of the war have disappeared entirely from the widely read right-wing tabloids like *The New York Post* and, at best, retreated to the middle pages of more credible newspapers. Enough elected politicians in both parties, scurrying for cover, now routinely make sure to note that their support for the war did not rest on the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Rarely mentioned is that the lack of such weapons, combined with the inability to find proof of links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, invalidates the claim that Iraq actually posed a national security threat to the United States. Everyone in the political establishment now points to humanitarian motives. For the most part, however, such concerns were not upper-most in their minds *then* and there is little reason to believe that they believed them decisive for the public opinion of the American public: human rights indeed became championed by self-styled “realists” like Paul Wolfowitz and Henry Kissinger—whose reputations were previously based on denying them—only when claims concerning the imperiled national interests of the United States were revealed as vacuous.

President Bush and members of his cabinet may now insist that the weapons will ultimately be found, with luck perhaps just before the next election, and the links to Al Qaeda will soon be unveiled. But this is already to admit that the evidence did not exist when the propaganda machine began to roll out its arguments for war. The administration had untold intellectual resources from which to learn that the United States would not be welcomed as the liberator of Iraq and that serious problems would plague the post-war reconstruction. But the administration wasn’t interested: it was content to forward its position *and then* find information to back it up. This indeed begs two obvious questions that are still hardly ever asked by the mainstream media: Would the American public have supported a war against Iraq *under those circumstances* and, perhaps more importantly, did this self-induced ignorance about conditions in Iraq help produce the current morass in which billions of

dollars have been wasted and, seemingly every day, another few young American soldiers are being injured or killed?

Millions of dollars were wasted by a special prosecutor on investigating false allegations of financial impropriety by Bill and Hillary Clinton. Impeachment proceedings were begun following the revelations of an affair between the then president and an intern. The media was up in arms and its champions still pat themselves on the back for their role in bringing about the Watergate hearings. When it comes to the chorus of untruth perpetrated over Iraq, which brought a nation into war with the resulting loss of lives and resources, it seems the public interest is best served by “bi-partisan” committees and a submissive press. Just as the Republican Party has been flagrant in its refusal to rationally justify its war of “liberation,” which is leaving an increasingly sour taste in the mouths of occupiers and occupied alike, the centrist Democratic Leadership Council made famous by Bill Clinton is now warning the public that—with the recent surge in the polls of Governor Howard Dean—its party is on the verge of being taken over by a “far left” intent upon opposing tax cuts, introducing “costly” social programs, and criticizing the foreign policy of the Bush administration.

Leading members of the DLC poignantly ask whether the Democrats wish “to vent or govern” and when questioned whether the current disarray in which the party finds itself was a product of Republican success or Democratic blunders, Senator Evan Bayh of Indiana, chairman of the organization, responded that it was a matter of “assisted suicide.” Forgotten was the election of November 2002 in which, by every serious account, it was the inability of the Democratic Party to offer any meaningful alternative to the policy of President Bush that led to the most disastrous non-presidential year losses in American history. It doesn’t seem to matter that the “bi-partisan” candidates like Joseph Lieberman, who refuse to offer a coherent alternative on domestic and foreign policy issues, are not catching on with the American public. It also doesn’t seem to matter that the proposed tax cuts work against the interests of the party’s own constituency, that social welfare programs would cost a fraction of the billion dollars a month spent in Iraq, and that the current foreign policy is undermining respect for the United States throughout the world. Ignored is the way in which the Democratic Party—the party of FDR, Bobby Kennedy, and Paul Wellstone—has become a joke on the mid-night talk shows. And, all the while, the “liberal” media nods its head and counsels prudence. Senator Bayh has no clue: as it now

stands, the Democratic Party can neither “vent” *nor* “govern.” Democrats should worry about their image—especially since they don’t have one.

The United States is ever more surely appearing less like a functioning democracy in which ideologically distinct parties and groups debate the issues of the day than a one-party state ruled by shifting administrative factions. Free speech exists, but to have a formal right and to make substantive use of it is a very different matter. Consensus and bi-partisanship are becoming increasingly paranoid preoccupations of the media whose range of debate is becoming narrowed to that between humpty and dumpty. Noam Chomsky may not be everyone’s taste, but his little collection of interviews *9-11* (New York: Seven Stories Press) was *the* best-selling work on that terrible event: when was the last time you saw him interviewed on mainstream media? It is the same with Barbara Ehrenreich, Frances Fox Piven, and any number of other radical or progressive public figures. Every now and then, of course, Cornel West may pop up for an interview on MSNBC, there are still a few critical editorialists like Paul Krugman in *The New York Times* and Robert Scheer in *The Los Angeles Times*, and Sean Penn can still pay for a full page advertisement to express his critical views on the war. Nevertheless, their voices are being drowned out by the right-wing pundits that dominate what conservatives—ever ready to view themselves as the victim of the system they control—castigate as the “liberal” media.

The situation brings to mind the vision of a society dominated by what Herbert Marcuse once termed “repressive tolerance”: a world in which establishmentarians can point to the rare moment of radical criticism to better enjoy the reign of an overwhelming conformity. The evidence is everywhere: CNN is only a minor player when compared with the combined power of television news shows with huge audiences hosted by mega-celebrities—still relatively unknown in Europe—like Rush Limbaugh, Bill O’Reilly, and Pat Robertson. Belief in the reactionary character of the American public has generated a self-fulfilling prophecy: the public gets the shows it wants that, in turn, only strengthen the original prejudices. Edward R. Murrow, so courageous in his resistance to the hysteria of the 1950s, may often be invoked by the “fourth estate,” but that invocation is merely symbolic.

Hardly a word is said any longer about the skepticism of millions who participated in the mass demonstrations that rocked the United States or how the mainstream media criticism of Tony Blair has transformed the English

political landscape. One criterion for judging democracy is the plurality of views presented to the public. That is because the number of views expressed usually reflects the number of political choices from which the public can choose. It is striking to reflect upon the range of perspectives expressed during the era of Progressivism, the New Deal, and the 1960s. By the same token, however, the attempt to constrict civil liberties in moments of crisis has been a fundamental trend of American history. Thus, in the current context, it is chilling to consider the narrowing of debate over the legitimacy of a terrible war to sixteen words made in a presidential speech, an increasingly corrupt evaluation of policy options, and a growing inability of the American public to grasp the distrust its present government inspires elsewhere.

A current Pew Poll of more than forty-four countries, directed by former Secretary of State Madeline Albright, shows that distrust of the United States has grown in an exceptionally dramatic fashion in each of them. This includes sensitive nations like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Indonesia where unfavorable ratings of the United States have gone from 36% in the summer of 2002 to 83% in May of 2003. The “streets” of Europe and, more importantly, the Arab world have been lost. Perhaps they will be regained at a future time. But the numbers in this poll express anger at a basic reality. With its new strategy of the “pre-emptive strike” buttressed by a \$400 billion defense budget, bigger than that of the next eighteen nations put together, the United States has rendered illusory the idea of a “multi-polar world.” It has become the hegemon amid a world of subaltern states and it has no need to listen or debate. The difference between truth and falsehood no longer matter. There remains only the fact of victory, the fall of Saddam Hussein, and the bloated self-justifications attendant upon what Senator J. William Fulbright, the great critic of the Vietnam War, termed “the arrogance of power.”

Americans have traditionally tended to rally around the president in times of war. But this war, according to the president, has no end in sight. A new department of “homeland security” is being contemplated and the civil liberties of citizens are imperiled. Justification is supplied by manipulative and self-serving “national security alerts” in which the designation of danger shifts from yellow to orange to red and then back again without the least evidence being presented regarding why a certain color was chosen and why it was changed. The bully pulpit of the president, as Theodore Roosevelt called it, can go a long way in defining the style of national discourse and a

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sense of what is acceptable to its citizenry. This is where leadership asserts itself. Nevertheless, precisely on this question of leadership for which President Bush has received such lavish praise, he is weakest.

Beyond all social policy concerns, or disagreements over any particular issue of foreign policy, this president is presiding over a newly emerging culture in which truth is subordinate to power, reason is the preserve of academics, paranoia is hyped, and know-nothing nationalism is celebrated. No longer is the constructive criticism of genuine democratic allies taken seriously: better to rely on a corrupt “coalition of the willing” whose regimes have been bribed, whose economies have been threatened, and whose soldiers have been exempt from fighting this unending war on terror. There is little critical self-reflection and not the hint of an apology for its conduct in the weeks before the war broke out. It is dangerous to underestimate the moral high ground that has been squandered since 9/11. The question for other nations is this: how to trust the liar whose arrogance is such that he finds it unnecessary to conceal the lie?

Democracy remains elusive in Iraq, and Afghanistan is languishing in misery while the creation of new threats to the national security of the United States is being undertaken right now. Iran trembles. Syria, too. And there is always Cuba or North Korea. The enemy can change in the blink of an eye. The point about arbitrary power is, indeed, that it is arbitrary. What happens once the next lie is told and the next gamble is made? It is perhaps useful to think back to other powerful nations whose leaders liked to lie and loved to gamble—and who won and won and won again until finally they believed their own lies and gambled once too often.

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