MICHAEL I. NIMAN **DECEMBER 08, 03**

e-Washing history, one digital archive at a time

IMAGINE a world where nothing you ever said was ever really said – where you could go back in time and unsay anything stupid, offensive or just plain untrue. Imagine a world where you would never in the future have to bear responsibility for anything you say or do today. This is the world that George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld are trying to create for themselves.

There's nothing new about America's political culture being built on a foundation of lies. Recent books document the habitual fibbing of some of the corporate media's loudest political commentators, from Rush Limbaugh (*Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot,* Dell) to Bill O'Reilly (*The O'Really Factor: Unspinning Fox News Channel's Bill O'Reilly,* Seven Stories Press). And there's nothing new about presidential lying. The Bush people, however, have taken this lying to a new level.

Bush used his State of the Union Address to lay out a foundation of carefully calibrated lies, the culmination of which have led us into an illegal aggressive war that has cost the lives of hundreds of American soldiers and about 10,000 Iraqi civilians, while injuring ten times that number, costing the American taxpayer over $100 billion dollars and saddling this nation with an unprecedented fiscal deficit.

Big Brother was never wrong

George Orwell, in his classic book, "1984," wrote about how Big Brother gave a speech wrongly predicting that the Eurasian enemy would launch an offensive in North Africa, leaving South India in peace. When the opposite eventually proved true, Orwell wrote, "It was therefore necessary to rewrite a paragraph of Big Brother's [previous] speech, in such a way as to make him predict the thing that actually had happened." Orwell was off by

twenty years, but frighteningly on target.

Take the Iraq war. It was all about weapons of mass destruction. Iraq had them. They were quickly developing new ones. And they would eventually threaten the American homeland with them. We had proof. The Bush administration went so far, according to US Senator Bill Nelson (D. Florida), as to hold a classified briefing prior to the war authorization vote, where they informed 75 senators that Iraq not only had weapons of mass destruction ready to fire, but that they also had unmanned aerial vehicles that could strike US cities. The supposed risk was so grave that we had to write a new chapter in American history, defying international law by launching our first official "pre-emptive" invasion of a sovereign country that did not act aggressively toward us or our allies.

It was never about banned weapons

It is now painfully clear that Iraq, despite being armed with chemical and biological weapons by the previous Reagan and Bush administrations, no longer possessed them at the time the US invaded earlier this year. As it turned out, two successive waves of UN weapons inspectors were correct – Iraq had destroyed their weapons as mandated by the UN. It might have taken eight years, and the threat of another war, but evidence shows that gnarly as Saddam may have been, his government complied. There were no banned weapons in Iraq at the time of the US invasion.

But suddenly, the war, in retrospect, was no longer about weapons of mass destruction. And if you remember otherwise, you're wrong.

Shortly after the invasion began, George W. Bush told UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan that the fundamental question was, "Did Saddam Hussein have a weapons program?" The answer, according to Bush, was, "Absolutely." He went on to explain, "We gave him a chance to allow the inspectors in, and he wouldn't let them in. And therefore, after a reasonable request, we decided to remove him from power."

The problem with this contention is that it is blatantly false. The inspectors were in Iraq and working prior to the invasion. This was a well documented and unquestionable fact. They only fled the country, for their own safety, after the Bush administration announced its intention to invade. No credible source has challenged this chronology. Not coincidentally, the previous wave of UN inspectors were also forced out of the country, not by the Iraqis, but by the threat of the Clinton administration's ensuing bombardment of Iraq.

Revisionist history

Bush's statements flew in the face of this obvious reality. And like Orwell's fictive Big

Brother, Bush needed help scrubbing history clean of a few embarrassing little facts. Orwell created the character Winston, who "crumpled up the original message and any notes that he himself had made, and dropped them into the memory hole to be devoured by the flames." George W. Bush doesn't have a flaming "memory hole" to incinerate the past – but he does have a compliant mass media – one that allowed this quote to fly by almost unchallenged, with papers such as *The New York Times* simply ignoring the issue.

The *Washington Post*, one of the only major papers to critically examine this false chronology, reported on July 15th, 2003, in the body of a larger story, that this statement "appeared to contradict the events leading up to war this spring." They stopped well short, however, of examining the ramifications of Bush's blatant attempt to rewrite the chronology leading up to the invasion.

This is revisionist history. Interestingly enough, however, the charge of historical revisionism came not from Bush's critics, but from Bush himself, in what seems like a full frontal charge against his ultimate enemy – reality. On June 16th, Bush told a group of New Jersey business leaders that "revisionist historians" were falsely alleging that the US never had proof of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. This would be the same proof that history, in fact, has proven we never had.

It's now six months later. The current Bush administration story is that the war wasn't about weapons of mass destruction at all. It is, and always was, about removing the "evil" dictator Saddam Hussein from power. Of course Saddam's brutality wasn't a concern as US intelligence agencies quietly supported his rise to power as an ardent anti-communist, beginning in 1959 when he was allegedly part of a CIA-   backed plan to assassinate Iraqi Prime Minister Gen. Abd al-Karim Qasim. And his brutality wasn't a problem when Bush senior was in the White House, and Richard Armitage, the current Deputy Secretary of State, defended Saddam's government from US sanctions, arguing international law does not prevent a leader from using weapons of mass destruction against his own people. And while the rhetoric about Saddam certainly changed during the 1990s, this invasion was no more about human rights than the Afghanistan invasion was about freeing women from Taliban oppression – it was about a supposed threat to the United States. A threat that didn't exist.

Rumsfeld never said nothing

The "popular invasion" myth was always alive as a rhetorical subtext even before the start of the war. When PBS' Jim Lehrer asked Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld if he thought the Iraqi people would welcome an invasion by US troops, Rumsfeld replied, "There is no question but that they would be welcomed."

In retrospect, the Iraqis have been anything but welcoming. When a radio news anchor recently asked Rumsfeld about his earlier statements, Rumsfeld replied, "Never said that. Never did. You may remember it well, but you're thinking of someone else. You can't find anywhere me saying anything like [that]." PBS, however, maintained a transcript of Jim Lehrer's interview online – proving Rumsfeld a liar. Rumsfeld is quoted as saying exactly what he denied saying.

Back in September of 2002, Rumsfeld testified before the House Armed Services Committee, arguing that Saddam Hussein's government "has amassed large clandestine stocks of biological weapons, including anthrax and botulism toxin and possibly smallpox. His regime has amassed large clandestine stockpiles of chemical weapons, including VX and sarin and mustard gas." He repeated these charges in various forms during the months leading up to the Iraq invasion.

After the invasion, however, when weapons weren't found, a reporter asked Rumsfeld if perhaps he was "a little too far leaning" in his allegations of "extensive stocks" of chemical weapons. Rumsfeld angrily shot back, "You go back and give me something that talks about extensive stocks... I'd be surprised if you found the word 'extensive.'" Technically, Rumsfeld is accurate. He used the words "large" and "stockpiles" – not the word "extensive." Semantics aside, however, he misled the nation and helped hoodwink us into going to war, no matter whether he falsely described Iraq's weapons as "a large stockpile" or an "extensive stock."

Bush's "War is Over" quote goes to the memory hole

The biggest "eat-my-words" quote of this war, however, came from George W. Bush himself on May 1st (May Day), 2003, when he unilaterally declared the ongoing Iraq war to be "over." His words, uttered on the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, as he made history by being the first standing American president to don a military uniform while serving in civilian office, were posted on the White House website. The web page explained that Bush announced "Combat operations in Iraq have ended."

This statement became a horrific sort of joke in the ensuing months as both Americans and Iraqis continued to die by the score in what was clearly an ongoing war. With far more US service personnel killed and wounded since the supposed end of the war, than during the war, Americans began to question Bush's "war is over" myth. In October, however, Bush seems to have changed his speech post-facto. The new version of the old speech now reads that "major" combat operations have ended. The original speech, declaring by inference that all combat operations have ended, seems to have gone down the memory hole, unceremoniously deleted by a real-life Winston.

The Google Internet search engine, however, creates snapshots of all the web pages that its crawlers scan, including the White House site. Hence, there was an embarrassing anomaly, with the Google cache of the site having the actual speech, and the actual White House site having the doctored "archive." The White House shot back with a response beyond the technological vision of Orwell's days. They embedded search robot control instructions (robot.txt) into their websites to "disallow" Google and other Internet search engines from archiving many pages pertaining to Iraq. Critics claim this gives the White House more of a free hand to rewrite their own history. The White House techies counter that they just wanted to eliminate the possibility of confusing duplicate results appearing on search engine result pages.

Cleansing Time magazine

As paper libraries and archives give way to electronic data collections, history is becoming ever more frail. A composition instructor at the University of California at Irvine got a disturbing email from a friend who was searching *Time* magazine's digital archives looking for a certain article written by George Bush Senior and his Defense Secretary, Brent Scowcroft. In that article, the two men purportedly explained why they decided not to occupy Iraq in 1991. Their reason was that such an action would have exceeded the UN's mandate to remove Iraq from Kuwait, and would have destroyed the precedent of an international response to aggression. They went on to argue, in the March 2, 1998 article, had they chosen to occupy Iraq in 1991, the US would probably still be occupying a bitterly hostile land.

The article, in today's light, seems like a clear rebuff to junior's invasion. But the article is gone. It's no longer in *Time*'s digital archives – as if it never existed. The Irvine instructor decided to charge her students with the task of verifying the existence or nonexistence of the article. As it turned out, the article was in fact real, and was still archived by a number of subscription-accessed library research databases – but it was no longer in the *Time* archives. Interestingly, none of her digital-age students thought to look for the paper copy of the magazine in the library. The instructor did, finding not only the missing article, but also finding that editors changed the titles on many of the articles remaining in the Time archives.

Time's post-facto editing is especially disturbing since it shakes the very foundation of library sciences. An archive is a collection of past works. By definition it must be left intact. Archive managers have no right to edit history. In this case, *Time* blew their chance to censor this story in 1998.

Historically, tyrants have always attacked and tried to control the historical record. With the digital era, the age of book burning might finally be over. It's easier, more effective and less alarming simply to quietly change historical facts. In this respect, the Bush administration is following an old script, but they're doing it with a new technology, in essence questioning the very foundation of not only truth, but reality. ●

Editor's note: This article is an updated version of an original that appeared in ColdType.net on December 8.