

Selective Amnesia

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The pundits who sold the Iraq War change their tune and bury their records

When political leaders make drastic mistakes, accountability is delivered in the form of elections. That occurred in November when voters removed the party principally responsible for the war in Iraq. But the invasion would not have occurred had Americans not been persuaded of its wisdom and necessity, and leading that charge was a stable of pundits and media analysts who glorified President Bush's policies and disseminated all sorts of false information and baseless assurances.



what Oil war?

Yet there seems to be no accountability for these pro-war pundits. On the contrary, they continue to pose as wise, responsible experts and have suffered no lost credibility, prominence, or influence. They have accomplished this feat largely by evading responsibility for their prior opinions, pretending that they were right all along or, in the most extreme cases, denying that they ever supported the war.

Michael Ledeen, a Freedom Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a contributing editor to National Review, chose the boldest option. In response to a Vanity Fair article about the swarms of neoconservatives abandoning the administration and the war as both become increasingly unpopular, Ledeen emphatically denied that he backed the invasion in the first place. Writing on National Review's blog, The Corner, Ledeen claimed, "I do not feel 'remorseful,' since I had and have no involvement with our Iraq policy. I opposed the military invasion of Iraq before it took place."

It is difficult to overstate the audacity—and the mendacity—of Ledeen's claim. In August 2002, he wrote a scathing article in National Review following an appearance by Brent Scowcroft on "Face the Nation," in which the former national security adviser argued against the invasion. Ledeen devoted his entire column to mocking Scowcroft's concerns:

It's always reassuring to hear Brent Scowcroft attack one's cherished convictions; it makes one

cherish them all the more. ... So it's good news when Scowcroft comes out against the desperately-needed and long overdue war against Saddam Hussein and the rest of the terror masters.

Declaring that "Saddam is actively supporting al Qaeda, and Abu Nidal, and Hezbollah," Ledeen wrote, "the Palestinian question can only be addressed effectively once the war against Saddam and his ilk has been won." In response to Scowcroft's concern that invading Iraq could "turn the whole region into a caldron and destroy the War on Terror," Ledeen retorted, "One can only hope that we turn the region into a cauldron, and faster, please. If ever there were a region that richly deserved being cauldronized, it is the Middle East today."

On countless occasions, Ledeen called for the invasion to start as soon as possible. In an August 2002 interview with FrontPage Magazine, when Jamie Glazov asked when the war should begin. Ledeen answered, "Yesterday."

He appeared on MSNBC's "Hardball" on Aug. 19 to complain again that the war had not started: "I think that if President Bush is to be faulted for anything in this so far, it's that he's taken much too long to get on with it, much too long."

The following month, in the Wall Street Journal, Ledeen wrote, "Saddam Hussein is a terrible evil, and President Bush is entirely right in vowing to end his reign of terror. If we come to Baghdad, Damascus and Tehran as liberators, we can expect overwhelming popular support. [I]t is impossible to imagine that the Iranian people would tolerate tyranny in their own country once freedom had come to Iraq. Syria would follow in short order."

While it is difficult to be more dishonest than Ledeen, it is difficult to be more wrong than Charles Krauthammer. Prior to the invasion, Krauthammer used his various media platforms—his column at the Washington Post and his almost daily appearances on Fox News—to warn that Iraq was rapidly building up its WMD capabilities and that the U.S. risked running out of time if it did not invade immediately. He assured Americans that the war would pay for itself with oil revenues and that Iraqis would greet Americans as liberators.

In an Aug. 26, 2002 Time column, Krauthammer crystallized the issue at the heart of the Iraq discussion: "The growing debate on invading Iraq hinges on Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction." In his Washington Post column of Oct. 7, Krauthammer argued, "Hawks favor war on the grounds that Saddam Hussein is reckless, tyrannical and instinctively aggressive, and that if he comes into possession of nuclear weapons in addition to the weapons of mass destruction he already has, he is likely to use them or share them with terrorists."

According to Krauthammer, the WMD threat was so imminent that, as he argued on Fox News on Nov. 8, 2002, waiting a matter of months could mean that Saddam obtained nuclear capability: "Under this Resolution, if Blix does not have to report back to the Security Council for 105 days, do the math. That's the 21st of February. That is a very long time away. And it could be at the end of our window to attack." In his Nov. 15, Post column, Krauthammer rang the alarm yet again: "We've been given time, but so has Hussein. Time to hide his weapons. Time even to distribute them through Iraqi agents—aka diplomats using diplomatic pouches—into the heart of the enemy. (We still don't know where last year's anthrax came from.) Time to give the stuff to terrorists who, as Osama bin Laden's tape suggests, are now prepared to make common cause with Hussein."

Now, as the war he demanded lies in ruins, Krauthammer uses his Post column to revise his record: "Our objectives in Iraq were twofold and always simple: Depose Saddam Hussein and replace his murderous regime with a self-sustaining, democratic government." His hysterical obsession with

WMD has been whitewashed from his pundit history, and in its place is a goal that Krauthammer barely mentioned prior to the war.

As recently as Oct. 28, 2005, he mocked foreign-policy realists for their belief that democracy could not take root in Iraqi culture, insisting that “the overwhelming majority of Iraq’s people have repeatedly given every indication of valuing their newfound freedom.” But now, Krauthammer claims that the war he urged is failing because Iraqis are incapable of understanding what freedom is about:

[T]he problem here is Iraq’s particular political culture, raped and ruined by 30 years of Hussein’s totalitarianism. Is this America’s fault? No. It is a result of Iraq’s first democratic election. It was never certain whether the long-oppressed Shiites would have enough sense of nation and sense of compromise to govern rather than rule. The answer is now clear: United in a dominating coalition, they do not.

That the failed war is the Iraqis’ fault has become a leading neoconservative excuse. On Nov. 3, Paul Mirgenoff of the Powerline blog blamed the Iraqis for electing the wrong prime minister— “The Iraqis voted in the Shia-militia-friendly Maliki government, thereby making it difficult, if not impossible, for the U.S. to work with the current government to curb sectarian violence.” But in April, Mirgenoff lavished the Iraqis with praise for that very choice, with his “acknowledgement that the selection of Jawad al-Maliki to be Iraq’s prime minister is good news” because Iraqis were “resisting Iranian pressure to back Ibrahim al-Jafari” and thus “stood up for a unified Iraq.”

This is common practice in the world of punditry: most war advocates continue to parade around as foreign-policy experts even though, with the rarest exception—an Andrew Sullivan here or there—virtually none has acknowledged his error.

The dynamic is also evident among former Bush supporters now trying to distance themselves from the unpopular president. Many who loyally supported and even venerated Bush when he was riding high now pretend to have recognized his flaws all along.

In her Oct. 26, 2006 Wall Street Journal column, Peggy Noonan tried to demonstrate how intellectually honest she is by claiming that well-connected Republicans thought the GOP deserved to lose the midterm election. For the party’s woes, she blamed the president: “They want to fire Congress because they can’t fire President Bush.” Trying to explain Republican dissatisfaction, she wrote:

Republican political veterans go easy on ideology, but they’re tough on incompetence. They see Mr. Bush through the eyes of experience and maturity. They hate a lack of care. They see Mr. Bush as careless, and on more than Iraq—careless with old alliances, disrespectful of the opinion of mankind. ‘He never listens,’ an elected official who is a Bush supporter said with a shrug some months ago.

Along the way the president’s men and women confused the necessary and legitimate disciplining of a coalition with weird and excessive attempts to silence Republican critics. They have lived in a closed system. They now want to open it but don’t know how. Listening is a habit; theirs has long been to suppress.

But in early 2004, when arguing for President Bush’s re-election, Noonan employed her trademark effusiveness to glorify the president’s character and pay homage to his humility and great sense of responsibility:

Mr. Bush is the triumph of the seemingly average American man. He's normal. He thinks in a sort of common-sense way. He speaks the language of business and sports and politics. You know him. He's not exotic. But if there's a fire on the block, he'll run out and help. He'll help direct the rig to the right house and count the kids coming out and say, 'Where's Sally?'

He's responsible. He's not an intellectual. Intellectuals start all the trouble in the world. And then when the fire comes they say, 'I warned Joe about that furnace.' And, 'Does Joe have children?' And 'I saw a fire once' ...

Bush ain't that guy. Republicans love the guy who ain't that guy. Americans love the guy who ain't that guy

So in just over two years, Bush went from being a diligent Everyman to a know-it-all tyrant who listens to no one, stamps out dissent, and is irresponsible with his duties. Noonan now depicts Bush in this way while pretending that she never oozed praise.

But her reversal isn't as brazen as the pro-war, pro-Bush pundits who have begun advocating the very views they spent the last three years demonizing. Ever since the U.S. invaded, those who pointed out that we were achieving little more than mass death, destruction of American credibility, conversions of moderate Muslims into extremists, and a serious weakening of our military were vilified as America-hating terrorist allies who wanted us to lose. Those who simply pointed out that the war effort wasn't going according to promise were derided as cut-and-run "defeatocrats" who lacked the intestinal fortitude to fight.

Yet pundits who equated dissent with treason are now declaring the war to be a failure and are advocating withdrawal without bothering to reconcile their current views with their previous allegations.

New York Post columnist Ralph Peters wrote in November 2005 that a failure to see the mission through to completion would tell the world that "Americans are cowards who can be attacked with impunity." He further argued that "a U.S. surrender would turn al Qaeda into an Islamic superpower" and that "[i]f we run away from our enemies overseas, our enemies will make their way to us. Quit Iraq, and far more than 2,000 Americans are going to die."

But on Nov. 2, 2006, Peters wrote a column in USA Today announcing, "Iraq is failing. No honest observer can conclude otherwise. If they continue to revel in fratricidal slaughter, we must leave." The same columnist who warned just a year ago in the most alarmist tone that withdrawal would gravely endanger the U.S., now claims that "Contrary to the prophets of doom, the United States wouldn't be weakened by our withdrawal, should it come to that."

All of these self-proclaimed super-patriots who spent the last three years shrieking that anyone who criticizes the war is a friend of the terrorists are now being forced to admit that the war is unwinnable. But rather than acknowledging their reversal, they seek to erase the public record, both to salvage their reputations and to obscure the intensity of their attacks against those who were right. Such vitriol against critics muted debate in the first place and ensured that we stayed in Iraq, pretending all along that things were going great.

There is nothing wrong with acknowledging one's errors and changing one's mind. When genuine, this should be encouraged. But these pundits are not doing that. They know that they were on the wrong side of the most vital issue of the last decade, and in trying to reverse their predictions reveal themselves to be deeply flawed not only in judgment but also in character.

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