



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

fff@fff.org www.fff.org

Don't Look for Sense Where There Is None **by Sheldon Richman**

Presidents, their cabinet officials, and their press secretaries show how much they respect the American people by how they use the English language. To be more precise, they indicate how much they disrespect the American people by how they abuse the language.

All presidents lie. We know that. But when a lying president has some regard for the intelligence of the American people, it shows in how he says things. The lies are sophisticated and harder to penetrate.

But when a president and his men believe the American people are a gang of idiots, it also shows in how they say things. The lies are silly on their face. The speakers sound like they are talking to children. They talk as though they don't expect us to remember what they said yesterday — or even 10 minutes ago.

The Bush administration is setting records for both disrespect and abuse of the language. It's getting tiresome. We're not all idiots.

The coming intensification of the decade-long war with Iraq has been the occasion for obfuscation that almost defies belief. What exactly is the administration's policy? That depends on who is speaking and to whom.

For many months and even years, President Bush and others in his cabinet have called for the ousting of Saddam Hussein as president of Iraq. The term they used was "regime change." This campaign accelerated after 9/11. But when people here and abroad objected that this would mean a war that would slaughter innocents and have catastrophic secondary consequences, Mr. Bush had to change tacks. To get "our allies" and the UN Security Council on board, he calculated that he would have to stop talking about regime change and start talking about disarmament. So that's what he did. His speech to the UN in September did not call for Hussein's overthrow by internal or external forces.

But what about regime change? How does the administration explain the switch in objective? Simple. It just denies there has been a switch.

In his speech from Cincinnati recently, Mr. Bush tried out a new line: regime change did not necessarily mean that Hussein had to go. He just had to agree to an impossible list of demands, which Mr. Bush thinks he'll never agree to, leaving literal regime change as our only option. This of course caused some confusion. What exactly is the policy?

Secretary of State Colin Powell tried to clarify things when he told NBC's Tim Russert that Hussein could stay in power if he disarmed. "All we are interested in is getting rid of those weapons of mass destruction," Powell said. Really? What about the other demands and all the earlier declarations that there was no alternative to regime change?

This tossed the ball back to the president. Was there a change in policy? No, Mr. Bush said, showing that he, like Lewis Carroll's Humpty-Dumpty, can use words to mean whatever he likes: "If he [Hussein] were to meet all the conditions of the United Nations ... that in itself would signal the regime has changed."

So that's what Mr. Bush means by regime change. Well, not exactly. Mr. Bush doesn't expect Hussein to get rid of his weapons, so in that case, regime change means ouster. Follow that?

Just when this verged on hopeless confusion, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer came along to help us out. "The policy is regime change, however it is defined."

Come again? "However it is defined"? That sounds eerily like "it depends on what the definition of 'is' is."

The real folly here is in trying to make sense of the day-to-day utterances of these men. It can't be done. What we can do is divine a deep logic by keeping in mind that Bush & Co. want war with the weak Saddam Hussein no matter what. Their task until the bombs start falling on Baghdad is to quiet any concerns of the American people and, if possible, to sign up some coalition members. Efforts to get the Security Council's blessing are aimed simply at avoiding a hassle. They would rather fight their little war without the idiots carping from the sidelines.

Sheldon Richman is senior fellow at The Future of Freedom Foundation (www.fff.org) in Fairfax, Va., editor of *Ideas on Liberty* magazine, and author of "'Ancient History': U.S. Conduct in the Middle East since World War II and the Folly of Intervention."