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Presidential Sophists on the Loose

by Sheldon Richman

The controversy over President Bush's State of the Union allegation about President Saddam Hussein of Iraq and African uranium is a lesson in how to distinguish a PR flack from an honest commentator. The latter tries to ground his statements in evidence and logic. The flack performs embarrassing mental contortions that have no bearing on the matter.

For example, to the criticism that the president knew or should have known that the uranium claim had been debunked, administration officials, outsider defenders, and the president himself reply that the offending sentence shouldn't have been in the speech and that it's all the CIA's fault. That's supposed to close the controversy and allow us to move on.

But wait — it's not responsive to the criticism. The question now is not whether the sentence should have been in the speech, but *why* it was in the speech, given everything else we know.

When the same apologists attribute the sentence's inclusion to intelligence complications or snafus, that is again unresponsive. It has already been established that the CIA, at the urging of Vice President Dick Cheney, sent an envoy to confirm or debunk the information. That envoy, former diplomat Joseph C. Wilson, concluded that the documents giving rise to the report were obviously fraudulent.

This is assuredly not merely a case of the CIA's failure to properly vet data. It knew the truth. It successfully counseled the president and other officials to keep the false story out of speeches in the fall of 2002. But the story ended up in the Big Speech in January 2003. Whatever it is, it's no intelligence snafu. CIA Director George Tenet looks like a classic fall guy.

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld add a Clintonian sentence-parsing touch to all this while trying to have it both ways. They want us to believe that although Bush shouldn't have made the statement, it was nonetheless accurate. So why not say it? Because, they claim, it did not meet the State of the Union's higher standard of confirmation. This, I submit, is gobbledygook.

Rice and Rumsfeld go on to say that on the basis of other, unrevealable evidence, the British government stands by the uranium allegation. Therefore, Bush's exact statement — that British intelligence said that Hussein tried to buy uranium — was in fact accurate and still is.

There's one problem with this story. Mr. Bush did not claim that British intelligence had *said* this. He claimed that British intelligence had *learned* it. To say someone learned something is to vouch for the information learned. (Would we say that before Galileo, astronomers had learned that the sun moved around the earth?) Bush could have stated, "British intelligence believes that Hussein tried to buy uranium. But we are not convinced yet." He didn't say that. There would have been no point in doing so because it would not have won support for his war.

In another line of attack, Bush's defenders in the pundit world say the Democrats are hypocrites because they voted for the pro-war resolution several months before the State of the Union address. This is a common form of counterattack: charge someone with hypocrisy and ignore the allegation. But it's not a valid argument. While it may discredit the speaker, it doesn't discredit the allegation. After all, the counterattack doesn't touch anyone who opposed the war resolution. Imagine if President Bush got caught lying under oath about an affair with an intern. Sure, a Clinton defender who criticized Bush would be a hypocrite. But that would not mean that the charge against Bush was false or trivial.

Yes, the Democrats, facing the resolution right before election day, were too cowardly to oppose it. What does that have to do with the administration's palpable dishonesty?

Another illegitimate defense is to say the uranium story is unimportant because there were other good reasons to go to war. This is truly immoral. Do the Republicans making this argument really believe that evidence of official lying and corruption of intelligence — in pursuit of war — are to be overlooked because the cause was good?

Sophistry is at least as old as ancient Greece. But it's never been quite this transparent.

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