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A President Lies about War? Shocking!

by Sheldon Richman

It is regarded as beyond the pale to suggest that a president of the United States would lie or otherwise play politics to win support for a war. Even President Bush's biggest critics in the Democratic Party shrink from using the L-word when they talk about the famous 16 words or the president's other unequivocal pre-war claims about Saddam Hussein's weapons. These critics prefer to talk about "exaggerations" or intelligence lapses.

Why is this so? "No president would stand up before the American people and boldly lie, if for no other reason than that he would fear getting caught." That's what many people are thinking.

But where have they been? Have they not heard that American presidents have lied or behaved politically with regard to war before? Have they never heard the names McKinley, Wilson, Roosevelt (the second), Truman, Johnson, and Bush (the first)?

In 1898 President William McKinley took the United States to war against Spain after an explosion of uncertain origin on the USS *Maine* in Havana Harbor. (Apparently it was a boiler mishap.)

In 1917 President Woodrow Wilson, after promising to keep America out of the European war, claimed that the German kaiser had launched unprovoked attacks on the United States, although Wilson had given naval escorts to arms-laden American merchant ships headed to England through the kaiser's declared submarine zone.

In 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt, who had also promised to keep America out of foreign wars, told the nation that Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor was unprovoked, although his administration had been striving arduously to get Japan or Germany to "fire the first shot."

In 1950 President Harry Truman, without a declaration of war, sent troops to Korea to combat the "communist threat" — although just before North Korea invaded South Korea, Truman's secretary of state said that the peninsula was outside America's defense perimeter. Truman changed his mind when he realized that the Republicans would claim he "lost Korea" — in other words, for political reasons.

In 1991 President George H.W. Bush went to war against Iraq after claiming that Saddam Hussein's forces, having occupied Kuwait, were poised to invade Saudi Arabia. Bush refused to declassify the satellite photos that allegedly demonstrated his claim, but former government intelligence officials analyzing commercial satellite pictures could find no massing of troops.

Then there was President Lyndon Johnson. Not exactly a paragon of honesty in his long political career, Johnson secured a blank check for U.S. intervention in Vietnam in 1964 on the pretext that the North Vietnamese had conducted an unprovoked attack against U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. In fact, on August 2, 1964, North Vietnamese PT boats tried, unsuccessfully, to torpedo an American ship that had been gathering intelligence to support South Vietnam's attacks in the north. But the August 4 attacks that Johnson told the American people about in a late-night televised address never took place. Before Johnson made his speech he had been informed by the top man on the scene that what seemed like attacks were the result of "freak weather effects on radar and overeager sonarmen." Capt. John J. Herrick had cabled the Pentagon that there were "no actual visual sightings" of North Vietnamese warships. The American people did not learn that truth until years later. Three days after the phantom attack, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, leading to a decade of brutal war, 58,000 American deaths, and 2 million Vietnamese deaths. A little lie went a long way.

Thus a lie by the current President Bush would be nothing new by historical standards. But what of the claim that the 16 words about uranium from Niger were inconsequential because they came months after Congress passed its Iraq resolution? In fact, when the House and Senate gave Bush *his* blank check, it was under the impression that the president was committed to working through the UN Security Council. But by the time of his State of the Union message last January he was preparing Congress and the American people for a unilateral war without UN sanction.

For that he needed a little extra propaganda. The uranium lie did the trick.

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