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Bush's Iraq: A Powerful Fantasy

FLYING TO MINNESOTA ON AIR FORCE ONE LAST WEEK, WHITE House press secretary Scott McClellan held a “gaggle”—that is, a mini-press conference—with reporters in the back of the plane. The first questions were about Hurricane Ivan and the Dan Rather flap, the compelling news periphera of the moment. Then I asked McClellan about the intelligence community’s dire assessment, sent to the President in a July National Intelligence Estimate (NIE), that we seem to be losing the war in Iraq.

“The role of the CIA is to look at different scenarios,” McClellan said. But all three CIA scenarios were awful, I pointed out. The best case was “tenuous stability,” a continuation of the sapping insurgency we’re seeing now.

McClellan began to read from talking points. The “pessimists and naysayers” had been wrong, he said, about the Iraqi people’s ability to establish a transitional government, a national council and a transitional law. The “Iraqi people” had little to do with establishing any of those, but McClellan plowed on. A reporter asked if McClellan was saying that the CIA was filled with “pessimists and naysayers,” but McClellan wouldn’t bite.

Two thoughts occurred to me as the taffy pull continued. For one thing, the President’s obvious skepticism about this National Intelligence Estimate stands in stark contrast to his wanton embrace of the NIE he received in October 2002, which said that Saddam probably possessed weapons of mass destruction. That report was produced after Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld pressured the CIA to come up with stronger evidence for invading Iraq. The current assessment is more credible. It comes from a cautious, chastened CIA. It was probably George Tenet’s last act as CIA director. And it was written well before the current spatter of dreadful developments, including the U.S. military’s acknowledgement that there are areas of Iraq, “no go” zones controlled by the insurgents, where we have decided not to fight. My second thought was pretty



A U.S. soldier patrolling Baghdad: Can Kerry hold Bush accountable for the mess?

wicked: Scott McClellan is beginning to sound like Baghdad Bob, the infamous spokesman for Saddam who announced hallucinatory Iraqi victories as the American troops closed in on Baghdad.

As he rolled across Minnesota last Thursday, Bush told his crowds pretty much the same things he’s been saying for months. Saddam was a threat. The world is a safer place now that he’s in jail. We must attack the terrorists before they attack us. Freedom has the “transformational power” to make the world a better place. We’re not conquerors; we’re agents of freedom. As for the current situation, “There’s a lot of violence in Iraq, I understand that,” he said in Rochester, “but Iraq now has a strong Prime Minister, National Council, and elections are scheduled in January.”

Except for the elections—which seem highly unlikely at this point—all of Bush’s statements have the virtue of being either true, truish or unprovable. His argument is

tight, concise and, so far, impregnable. It is also a clever distortion of reality. If the National Intelligence Estimate is accurate, we are facing a far more dangerous world than existed before the war. Many intelligence and military experts now believe that al-Qaeda has rebuilt its leadership structure and metastasized; that the U.S. military is overburdened and its leaders are likely to tell the next President that they lack the resources necessary to regain control in Iraq;

that the U.S. government has lost the credibility to lead the world into action against future threats from, say, Iran or North Korea; that Iraq itself seems in danger of splitting into three chaotic regions, which—in the NIE’s worst-case scenario—may lead to civil war.

And so there is only one significant question left in this presidential election year: Can John Kerry hold George Bush accountable for this mess? My guess is, probably not. The Republicans, with a strong assist from Kerry, have successfully painted the Democrat as a flip-flopping incompe-

tent when it comes to national security. It will be hard for Kerry to change that impression. In fact, he has only one chance remaining, in the presidential debates.

And that won’t be easy: I’ve never seen George Bush lose a debate. He is a brilliant minimalist. Kerry by contrast is all oratorical flab—although he did begin to show some signs of life last week in a solid speech to the National Guard convention, in which he blasted Bush’s “fantasy of spin” about Iraq. It is a powerful fantasy, though. And it is easy to predict Bush’s response to any Kerry criticism about Iraq: “My opponent is too pessimistic,” the President will say. “See, what he doesn’t understand is that the President of the United States has to stand firm. We can’t show weakness. And we won’t on my watch.” Unless Kerry can come off with a succinct, and lethal, response to those vaporous but compelling platitudes, he will lose this election. ■