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License to lie

In his devastating new book, Ron Suskind shows how 9/11 allowed George W. Bush and his shadowy courtier, Dick Cheney, to "create whatever reality was convenient."

By Gary Kamiya

Jun. 23, 2006 | If there are any observers who still deny that the Bush administration is the most secretive, vengeful, reality-averse, manipulative and arrogant government in U.S. history, they will have a lot of fast talking to do after reading Ron Suskind's new book, "The One Percent Doctrine." A meticulous work of reporting, based on interviews with nearly 100 well-placed sources, many of them members of the U.S. intelligence community, Suskind's book paints perhaps the most intimate and damning portrait yet of the Bush team.

At this point, one could forgive readers for asking, "How many more damning portraits of the Bush administration do we need?" From yellowcake to Joe Wilson to Abu Ghraib, the list of Bush scandals and outrages is endless, but nothing ever seems to happen. As the journalist Mark Danner has pointed out, the problem is not lack of information: The problem is that Americans can't, or won't, acknowledge what that information means.

But despite the Bush administration's apparent imperviousness to reality, the publication of "The One Percent Doctrine" is an important event. Even if we have to wait decades for historians to pass judgment on the Bush administration, it is vital that the record on which that judgment is made be compiled. And "The One Percent Doctrine," along with Richard Clarke's "[Against All Enemies](#)," George Packer's "[The Assassins' Gate](#)," Suskind's earlier "[The Price of Loyalty](#)" and a few others, will be one of the key documents on which that devastating judgment will be based.

"The Price of Loyalty" focused on former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and what he observed during his unhappy tenure with the Bushites -- the mania for loyalty, the true-believer ideology, the aversion to any truth that blocked their righteous plans. O'Neill was the book's protagonist and hero -- an outspoken maverick who refused to toe the Bush party line, and was fired for his disloyalty.

"The One Percent Doctrine" also has a central figure, but a far more problematic one: former CIA director George Tenet. Suskind paints as sympathetic a portrait of Tenet as any fair-minded journalist is likely to; indeed, in the end, he's a little too sympathetic to him. Referring to the tension between the CIA's role as an objective gatherer of information and the "fierce undertow toward war in Iraq," Suskind writes, "The dilemma of Tenet's role was diabolical." Just why rejecting the distortions and lies demanded by Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld in their push to make a case for war constituted a "diabolical dilemma" for Tenet, rather than just being part of his job, is never explained, beyond the fact that he

was a loyalist -- a breed for which Suskind typically has little patience. But Suskind does not conceal the fact that Tenet ultimately failed to prevent the White House and the Pentagon from corrupting and misusing intelligence. And in the end, most readers will probably feel that they have a clear enough impression of Tenet's strengths and weaknesses that they will forgive Suskind's somewhat sentimental tilt toward him as the courtesy due a key source.

As in "The Price of Loyalty," Suskind's great achievement here is to reveal how the Bush administration short-circuited and ultimately corrupted the way America's government is supposed to work. Actual coups d'état are lurid and violent and attract attention. As Suskind reveals, Cheney, Bush, Rumsfeld, Rice and Rove pulled off a much more sophisticated job: a bureaucratic coup d'état. Without firing a shot, they silenced critics, squelched unwanted facts, and created their own false but salable reality. As a result, they were able to launch a war justified by lies and driven by nothing more than Bush's ignorant whim. It is, truly, the heist of the century.

In "The Price of Loyalty," Suskind broke the major news that at Bush's very first National Security Council meeting, long before 9/11, he was already planning to remove Saddam Hussein from power -- the ur-text of a long line of revelations, culminating in the so-called Downing Street memo, showing that Bush's claim that he was going to war only as a last resort was a lie. Suskind's fine-grained reporting in that book revealed Bush as a superficially charming but singularly unpleasant character, at once ignorant, smug and aggressive, the kind of man who uses nicknames like "Pablo" as a way of reinforcing his own unearned, but all the more aggressively asserted, place as dominant primate. The really dark portrait, though, is of Cheney: the unseen power behind the throne, contemptuous and careful, unreadable and implacable.

Those portraits are only deepened in Suskind's new book. But Suskind's subject here is more momentous. While much of "The Price of Loyalty" dealt with the Bush administration's duplicitousness and myopia on the economy and the environment, "The One Percent Doctrine" focuses on its response to 9/11 -- the "war on terror" and the invasion of Iraq. And on George Tenet.

Suskind opens the book with a damning scene in which a CIA analyst warns Bush in August 2001 that bin Laden was planning to strike the U.S. Bush's response: "All right. You've covered your ass, now." That dismissive reply displayed not just Bush's frat-boy boorishness but his poor judgment. And after the terrorist attacks came, all constraints on Bush -- and Cheney -- vanished. Suskind depicts Bush as unbound, liberated by 9/11: While before the attacks senior staff worried that he wasn't thinking things through, now improvisation, not rational thought, was called for. This let Bush be Bush. "Left unfettered, and unchallenged, were his instincts, his 'gut,' as he often says, and an unwieldy aggressiveness that he'd long been cautioned to contain."

Many reasons have been advanced for why Bush decided to attack Iraq, a third-rate Arab dictatorship that posed no threat to the United States. Some have argued that Bush and Cheney, old oilmen, wanted to get their hands on Iraq's oil. Others have posited that the neoconservative civilians in the Pentagon, Wolfowitz and Feith, and their offstage guru Richard Perle, were driven by their passionate attachment to Israel. Suskind does not address these arguments, and his own thesis does not rule them out as contributing causes. But he argues persuasively that the war, above all, was a "global experiment in behaviorism": If the U.S. simply hit misbehaving actors in the face again and again, they would

eventually change their behavior. "The primary impetus for invading Iraq, according to those attending NSC briefings on the Gulf in this period, was to create a demonstration model to guide the behavior of anyone with the temerity to acquire destructive weapons or, in any way, flout the authority of the United States." This doctrine had been enunciated during the administration's first week by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, who had written a memo arguing that America must come up with strategies to "dissuade nations abroad from challenging" America. Saddam was chosen simply because he was available, and the Wolfowitz-Feith wing was convinced he was an easy target.

The choice to go to war, Suskind argues, was a "default" -- a fallback, driven by the "realization that the American mainland is indefensible." America couldn't really do anything -- so Bush and Cheney decided they had to do something. And they decided to do *this* something, to attack Iraq, because after 9/11 Cheney embraced the radical doctrine found in the title of Suskind's book. "If there's a one percent chance that Pakistani scientists are helping al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response," Suskind quotes Cheney as saying. And then Cheney went on to utter the lines that can be said to define the Bush presidency: "It's not about our analysis, or finding a preponderance of evidence. It's about our response."

This bizarre statement, in which might not only makes right but actually makes *reality*, recalls the infamous words of the anonymous Bush official who told Suskind for a New York Times Magazine article that the Bush administration made its own truth by acting, which those in the impotent "reality-based" community would have to come to terms with. Behind it is the notion that America is both omnipotent and infallible. No matter what it does, it is always right, and even if it makes a mistake it is impervious to harm. This quasi-theological mind-set, which as Suskind shows tracks perfectly with Bush's religio-patriotic fervor and Karl Rove's political strategy, allowed Cheney and Bush to believe that they could send 130,000 U.S. troops into the heart of the Arab world without negative consequences.

Since America's cause was by definition righteous and invincible, no "analysis" was necessary. But since the Bush-Cheney team still had to deal with a public that, not being part of the Elect, might not understand the holy truth, a kind of divine deception had to be practiced. Any facts that would reveal the war to be based not on an actual threat, but on Bush's gut and Cheney's crazed doctrine, had to be suppressed or replaced with better ones. This meant, among many other things, intimidating and squelching all intelligence analysts who pointed out the inconvenient truth that there was no connection between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida. Suskind is not the first to reveal this, but his reporting brings alive just how viciously persistent Cheney and Rumsfeld were in trying to construct a false reality that would justify their desired war.

One tale is particularly glaring. In January 2003, with the war propaganda machine in full gear, Tenet's chief of staff, John Moseman, saw the head of the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence, Jami Miscik, walking down the hall shaking with rage. "You okay?" he asked. "No. I'm not okay. I'm definitely not *okay!*" In Tenet's suite, Miscik, barely able to get the words out, told what happened. "Stephen Hadley, Condi's second [now head of the NSC], had called from the office of 'Scooter' Libby, Cheney's chief of staff. They wanted her down at Libby's office in the White House by 5 pm. At issue was the last in an endless series of draft reports about the connection between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda. How many

drafts? Miscik couldn't remember. The pressure from the White House -- and from the various intelligence divisions under the Vice President and the Secretary of Defense -- had started a week after 9/11."

Miscik had repeatedly shot down the bogus connections advanced by the war hawks, in particular the specious claim that hijacker Mohammad Atta had met with an Iraqi agent in Prague. But Cheney and Rumsfeld and their parallel-intel shops -- factories cranking out war-justifying lies -- kept putting them back in. Miscik had sent her final draft to Libby and Hadley a few days before, and told them this was it -- she wasn't changing it again. Now they were after her again. "'I'm not going back there, again, George,' Miscik said. 'If I have to go back to hear their crap and rewrite this goddamn report ... I'm resigning, right now.' She fought back tears of rage.

"Tenet picked up the phone to call Hadley. 'She is not coming over,' he shouted into the phone. 'We are not rewriting this fucking report one more time. It's fucking over. Do you hear me! And don't you ever fucking treat my people this way again. Ever!'

"They did not rewrite the report. And that's why, three weeks later, in making the case for war in his State of the Union address, George W. Bush was not able to say what he'd long hoped to say at such a moment: That there was a pre 9/11 connection between al Qaeda and Saddam."

But, Suskind points out, Bush did include in the SOTU speech two other critical claims: that Saddam had tried to acquire uranium from Niger, and had attempted to purchase high-strength aluminum tubes to make nuclear centrifuges. "Both statements were crafted to carry the clarion ring of proof, and both were known, by people inside the CIA and the White House, to fall far short of that standard."

It was Tenet's finest hour: the embattled spymaster facing down the White House and the Pentagon to defend his agency and the truth (except for the yellowcake and the tubes). But in the end, what comes across inescapably is that Tenet, for all of his down-to-earth, likable qualities, failed the crucial test: He did not stand up to Bush and Cheney's abuse of intelligence, and he allowed himself and his agency to take the fall for the White House's intentional misdeeds. The reason: blind loyalty. (This book could have borne the same title as Suskind's first.) After 9/11, Bush did not blame Tenet for the CIA's failure to stop the attacks, and "At that point, George Tenet would do anything his President asked.

Anything. And George W. Bush knew it." Suskind's book is a potent reminder of how seemingly laudable human emotions can affect the fate of nations. The disasters of the Bush presidency are due not just to ideology, faith and venality, but to office politics.

Suskind all but comes out and says what many have suspected: that Bush, although a man of deep faith -- he reads Scripture or a religious tract every morning -- is grossly intellectually unqualified to be president. Again and again, Suskind describes scenes that display his disengagement, his lack of curiosity, his ignorance of the most rudimentary facts. His inner circle knew his weaknesses, and assiduously prevented them from being known. "He is very good at some things that presidents are prized for, and startlingly deficient in others. No one in his innermost circle trusts that those imbalances would be well received by a knowledgeable public, especially at a time of crisis. So they are protective of him -- astonishingly so -- and forgiving."

But this is not news. Suskind's more momentous disclosure is the degree to which Cheney deliberately kept Bush in the dark, so as to be able to achieve his desired ends. For example, when Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto Saudi ruler, visited Bush in 2002, the advance packet sent by the Saudis to prepare Bush for the meeting was mysteriously diverted to Cheney's office. Bush never read it. As a result, he had no idea what the agenda of the meeting was and failed to respond to the Saudi's requests for American help with the exploding Israeli-Palestinian crisis, which severely weakened Abdullah's position as an ally in the "war on terror." Nor did he extract any concessions from them. For Cheney, it seems, the less Bush was prepared for Abdullah, the less chance he would make any concessions to the Arab leader. Or perhaps Cheney simply wanted to control the meeting for the sake of control.

Cheney and Rumsfeld, Suskind writes, viewed Bush as an inferior, the child of their contemporaries. A master at bureaucratic stealth, Cheney quietly orchestrated the war, which was "about the only matter on which all three agreed ... So, as America officially moved to a detailed action plan for the overthrow of Hussein, only three men would be in the know: Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld."

Cheney's strategy of keeping Bush in the dark, Suskind argues, went back to Watergate. The break-in and violation of laws was not the problem for Cheney, Suskind writes: The problem was that Nixon should have been "protected" from knowing about it. It was his knowledge that ultimately led to his undoing. Keeping information from Bush allowed the president to say anything without ever being held accountable. "He could essentially be 'deniable' about his own statements." The most notorious case of this was the National Intelligence Estimate, or NIE, laying out the case for war. Bush was given only the summary, which did not include the U.S. intelligence community's caveats about the yellowcake and aluminum tubes claims. Since Bush had not read the actual NIE, when those claims later turned out to be false, no one could accuse him of lying. And in the meantime, the higher good -- the war -- would have been achieved.

But Bush, in Suskind's portrayal, was hardly putty in Cheney's hands (although Suskind reports that inside the CIA Cheney was nicknamed "Edgar," after the ventriloquist Edgar Bergen, whose famous dummy was Charlie McCarthy). Bush played along with the game. He didn't want to know any more than Cheney wanted him to know. "No one would dare say that the President made it clear to his most trusted lieutenants he did not *want to be informed*, especially when the information might undercut the confidence he has in certain sweeping convictions."

Once truth becomes a mere instrument, to be used or ignored in pursuit of a desired end, there is no end to the lies and distortions. Suskind points out that two of Bush's proudest claims -- that the invasion of Iraq scared Libya into renouncing its WMD programs, and that a captured Arab named Abu Zubaydah was al-Qaida's No. 3 -- were known by Bush to be false. The Libya deal, Suskind explains, had been in the works for years. As for Zubaydah, in one of the book's more shocking revelations, Suskind reveals that U.S. agents quickly realized that Zubaydah was a madman with a split personality -- but that did not deter the Bush administration from applying its new, gloves-off interrogation methods. The result: "The United States would torture a mentally disturbed man and then leap, screaming, at every word he uttered."

Suskind's book is not all about the Bush administration's misdeeds. It is also a report -- and a tribute -- to the men and women who do the actual work of tracking America's enemies, who work in the

shadows and receive no credit. Their work exposed one of Suskind's big scoops, that al-Qaida was planning an attack on the New York subways -- a strike inexplicably called off by bin Laden's strategist, the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri. Their thankless and sometimes dangerous task is vital -- and, Suskind argues, it has been rendered incalculably harder by the war on Iraq. "An historical irony may be that after all the search and straddle to find common purpose between two grand initiatives -- the *find them, stop them* struggle and the overthrow of Hussein -- there was, finally, a connection between Iraq and the broader 'war on terror.' It was a catalytic relationship, like gasoline on a fire."

Suskind's coup de grâce on this subject is his reminder of Osama bin Laden's message to the American people just before the 2004 elections. The CIA's consensus: "bin Laden's message was clearly designed to assist the President's reelection ... On that score, any number of NSC principals could tell you something so dizzying that not even they will touch it: that Bush's ratings track with bin Laden's ratings in the Arab world." When Bush speaks, bin Laden's popularity soars -- and vice versa.

Suskind lays out an alternative to the Cheney-Bush doctrine: George Kennan's "containment" policy for the Soviet Union, which rejected calls for military confrontation. Suskind admits that Kennan's policy might not be embraced by those who had to live under communism -- but it helped prevent World War III for half a century, it avoided the moral horror of a nuclear attack, and in the end the Soviet empire fell.

There is a note of audacious humanism, a courageous willingness to look beyond hatred of the enemy, in Suskind's analysis. In discussing Kennan, he notes that the diplomat "knew the enemy, walked in his shoes, [and] could not manage to demonize him." In a discussion of the real art of intelligence, he makes a similar point: "the real fight ... unfurled in the shadows, beneath the line of sight, where you tracked and maybe met your opponent, your opposite number, and, that way, carried forward the sound principle of *know thy enemy*. This is solid advice, ancient really, containing the seeds of victory and, in the end, mercy."

To read the word "mercy" in the context of a fanatical enemy willing to kill thousands of civilians feels almost heretical, in an age when the Bush-Cheney "war on terror" has assumed the status of a holy war, and when anything less than the utter demonization of our foes is regarded as treason. Yet Suskind's call for understanding -- which certainly does not preclude the simultaneous use of deadly force, if necessary -- carries within it the seeds of a future bigger, and nobler, than the one offered by our leaders.

And if it is necessary to understand our enemy, it is also necessary to understand the risk that we could become the very thing we fear. Nietzsche wrote, "He who fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become a monster himself. And when you stare long into an abyss, the abyss also stares into you." Secrecy and lies in the service of a higher good -- it has a Marxist, a fascist, a theocratic sound. Little by little, under the guise of "national security" -- since the birth of the republic, always the greatest threat to American values -- Cheney and his blustering, deeply devout accomplice have steered America away from its priceless legacy as a land governed by laws, debate and transparency, and toward something none of us would want to recognize.

While there is no danger that America will become a fascist, totalitarian or theocratic state, every step

we take in that direction is a degradation and a danger. Yet somehow, it seems to be considered bad form to bring the subject up.

We are in a peculiar moment, one in which our politicians seem unable to articulate or even grasp the train wreck unfolding in front of them. Someday in the future, if the Democratic Party manages to transform itself from a cowering shadow to something approaching sentience, perhaps what really happened during the Bush era will be publicly debated.

Perhaps then we can ask how it happened that the government of the United States was hijacked by a bullying, fact-averse religious fanatic and his puppetmaster, an evil courtier out of Shakespeare. How we were plunged into a disastrous war simply because a cabal of ideologues and right-wing zealots, operating in autocratic secrecy, decided they wanted war. And how all of the normal workings of a democratic government -- objective analysis, checks and balances, transparency -- were simply trashed by an administration waving the bloody shirt of "terror."

But there is little reason for optimism that such a reckoning will take place anytime soon. The Democrats' failure to address the historic debacle that is the Bush presidency is so vast, so complete, that it must stem from reasons deeper than merely its pathetic fear of appearing to be weak on "national security" -- that meaningless shibboleth invoked by political consultants who would nervously triangulate if they were being devoured by a great white shark. Even the most hawkish Democrat must surely realize now that message separation is vitally needed, that merely quibbling around the edges of Bush's policies while waiting for him to collapse is a fool's game and leaves Democrats disorganized, confused and open to Karl Rove's cut-and-run smears. The best response to a bully is to hit him in the mouth -- as Rep. John Murtha did when he blasted Rove, whose combat experience consists of launching attack ads, as a fat-ass hypocrite.

That centrist Democrats like Hillary Clinton cannot clearly reject Bush's catastrophic war seems to reflect their deeper inability to articulate, or perhaps even to understand, two things: that Iraq has severely damaged our national security, and that the process by which the Bush administration sold their war has severely damaged our democracy. Yes, those are harsh claims, which go beyond Beltway decorum. And yes, we are at war. But gentlemanly behavior can be a betrayal of the country, as Suskind's sad portrait of Tenet makes clear. And the mere fact that troops are in the field should not end all debate. By refusing to use these legitimate arguments against Bush, the Democrats are not only committing a tactical political error, they are allowing the disease he imported to fester.

For the time being, it is left to journalists to expose the infamy. Ron Suskind's book is a valuable addition to that literature.

-- By Gary Kamiya

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