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The deadly lies of reliable sources

Ninety-five days before the invasion of Iraq began, I sat in the ornate Baghdad office of the deputy prime minister as he talked about the U.N. weapons inspectors in his country. "They are doing their jobs freely, without any interruption," Tariq Aziz said. "And still the warmongering language in Washington is keeping on."

The White House, according to Aziz, had written the latest U.N. Security Council resolution "in a way to be certainly refused." But, he added pointedly: "We surprised them by saying, 'OK, we can live with it. We'll be patient enough to live with it and prove to you and to the world that your allegations about weapons of mass destruction are not true.'"

Speaking that night in mid-December 2002, Tariq Aziz – dressed in a well-cut business suit, witty and fluent in English – epitomized the urbanity of evil. As a high-ranking servant of a murderous despot, he lied often. But not that time.

With knee-jerk professional reflexes, American journalists assumed that Iraqi officials were lying about weapons of mass destruction – and also assumed that officials such as George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and (especially) Colin Powell were being truthful. Overall, the news media helped to create a great market for war.

An author who soared in that bullish market was Kenneth Pollack, the former CIA analyst whose 2002 book "The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq" was a media-driven smash. A frequent presence on national television, Pollack eagerly promoted a book and a war at the same time. He called for a "massive invasion" of Iraq.

Now, in the current issue of the Atlantic magazine, Pollack has a long essay with a somewhat regretful tone. "What we have learned about Iraq's WMD programs since the fall of Baghdad leads me to conclude that the case for war with Iraq was considerably weaker than I believed," he writes. "I had been convinced that Iraq was only years away from having a nuclear weapon – probably only four or five years. That estimate was clearly off, possibly by quite a bit."

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But most journalists and pundits touted such estimates as reasonable because the media pros were predisposed to believe the pronouncements from administration officials. Now we're told that only hindsight has provided us the chance to see how wrong those estimates were. That's nonsense.

Extensive information, poking huge holes in key deceptions, was readily available at the time – but major U.S. media outlets are still reporting as though Bush's pre-war claims were credible when they were made. In reality, any "intelligence failure" was dwarfed by a contemporaneous media failure.

(If you have any doubt that the Bush gang's WMD claims could have been recognized as transparently bogus from the start, take a look at dozens of news releases assembled during many pre-war months by my colleagues at the Institute for Public Accuracy. Those releases, from 2002 and the first months of 2003, remain posted at www.accuracy.org without any change in wording.)

In late January, Senate committees heard testimony from the man who headed the 1,400-member weapons inspection team in Iraq during the last half of 2003. Longtime hawk and Bush 2000 campaign supporter David Kay declared: "Let me begin by saying, we were almost all wrong." And: "It is highly unlikely that there were large stockpiles of deployed militarized chemical and biological weapons there."

A week later, on Feb. 4, the Pentagon's Donald Rumsfeld appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee and simply drew from an inexhaustible supply of fog: "It was the consensus of the intelligence community, and of successive administrations of both political parties, and of the Congress, that reviewed the same intelligence, and much of the international community, I might add, that Saddam Hussein was pursuing weapons of mass destruction."

In the grand tradition of manipulatively farcical commissions appointed by a president to assess his devious actions, a front-page New York Times article reported with delicate euphemisms that Bush's new panel will "examine American intelligence operations, including a study of possible misjudgments about Iraq's unconventional weapons."

"Possible" – as though there's still any question about the pre-war intelligence verdicts proclaimed by the likes of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and Powell.

"Misjudgments" – as though the White House hadn't summoned any and all pseudo-evidence to rationalize its from-the-outset determination to invade Iraq.

After 27 years as a CIA analyst, Ray McGovern knows a few things about propaganda. He notes that "the 'investigation' is slated to go past the election. Members will be picked by the president, and the scope is unconscionably wider than

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is necessary." McGovern contends that "the key question for 2004 is whether the administration's stranglehold on the media can be loosened to the point where the electorate can wake up, take away the president's driver's license and put an end to the reckless endangerment."

The media war of 2004 is well underway. To the victor goes the White House.

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