

FEBRUARY 16

Cheney's dodge: Taking responsibility

When Dick Cheney surfaced on Wednesday long enough for an interview with Fox News eminence Brit Hume – an event that CNN's Jack Cafferty promptly likened to "Bonnie interviewing Clyde" – the vice presidential spin emerged from a timeworn bag of political tricks. Cheney took responsibility. Whatever that means.

The New York Times website swiftly made its top headline "Cheney Takes Full Responsibility for Shooting Hunter." Just before Fox News Channel aired interview segments at length, the summary from anchor Hume told viewers that Cheney had accepted "full responsibility for the incident." Hours later, the Washington Post's front-page story led this way: "Vice President Cheney accepted full responsibility yesterday..."

Ironically – while news outlets kept using the phrase "full responsibility" – the transcript of the interview posted on FoxNews.com shows that Cheney never used any form of the word "responsibility."

Whatever their exact words, the politicians who can't avoid acknowledging culpability are often the beneficiaries of excessive media plaudits for supposedly owning up to what they've done wrong. But those politicians rarely do more than just what the spin doctor ordered.

It's not brave or even forthright for an official to express the contrition that seems advisable from a public-relations standpoint. When a convicted defendant voices remorse just before sentencing, the statement is often viewed as little more than a ploy dictated by circumstance. But when a politician ostensibly "takes responsibility" in the court of public opinion, much of the media coverage attaches great significance to an essentially hollow statement that is a transparent effort to extinguish a scandal-fueled firestorm.

In almost every instance when a politician "takes responsibility" with great fanfare, there's no penalty attached to the proclamation. Across the terrain of political media, the I-take-responsibility maneuver is the equivalent of a hit-and-run driver offering an over-the-shoulder yell of "Sorry about that" while speeding away from a grisly scene.

On July 30, 2003 – several months after the occupation of Iraq began – President Bush

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held a news conference while U.S. forces continued to search in vain for weapons of mass destruction. High up in a front-page story, the New York Times reported that Bush "took responsibility for the first time for an assertion in his State of the Union address about Iraq's nuclear weapons program that turned out to be based on questionable intelligence."

Bush told reporters: "I take personal responsibility for everything I say, of course. I also take responsibility for making decisions on war and peace. And I analyzed a thorough body of intelligence, good, solid, sound intelligence that led me to come to the conclusion that it was necessary to remove Saddam Hussein from power."

In that instance, as in so many others, the president's declaration about taking responsibility was nothing more than hot air for inflated rhetoric – a dodge to divert attention from indefensible actions and evident deceptions.

Last year, on Sept. 13 at the White House, the president said: "Katrina exposed serious problems in our response capability at all levels of government, and to the extent that the federal government didn't fully do its job right, I take responsibility." Policies during the five months since then have compounded the administration's deadly negligence in response to Hurricane Katrina, underscoring the diversionary significance of the I-take-responsibility scam.

When Brit Hume and Dick Cheney did their Fox trot, they were performing the kind of spectacle we've seen many times on television. Network correspondents and powerful politicians know the boundaries and the steps. Their footwork may look simple, but it's fancy and well-practiced. Contrary to pretense, the probing journalist doesn't probe too much, and the forthcoming politician merely hunkers down with a new twist.

And so it goes: Whether the media uproar has to do with a quail hunt, or lethal negligence in connection with a hurricane, or chronic deception for a war, top officials may finally opt to "take responsibility." But that's nothing more than a propaganda technique for those who view lying as an essential means of governance.

Norman Solomon's latest book is "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com