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My Biggest Mistake in the White House

Failing to refute charges that Bush lied us into war has hurt our country.

By [KARL ROVE](#)

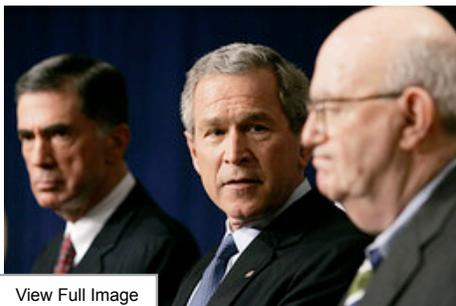
Seven years ago today, in a speech on the Iraq war, Sen. Ted Kennedy fired the first shot in an all-out assault on President George W. Bush's integrity. "All the evidence points to the conclusion," Kennedy said, that the Bush administration "put a spin on the intelligence and a spin on the truth." Later that day Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle told reporters Mr. Bush needed "to be forthcoming" about the absence of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Thus began a shameful episode in our political life whose poisonous fruits are still with us.

The next morning, Democratic presidential candidates John Kerry and John Edwards joined in. Sen. Kerry said, "It is time for a president who will face the truth and tell the truth." Mr. Edwards chimed in, "The administration has a problem with the truth."

The battering would continue, and it was a monument to hypocrisy and cynicism. All these Democrats had said, like Mr. Bush did, that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD. Of the 110 House and Senate Democrats who voted in October 2002 to authorize the use of force against his regime, 67 said in congressional debate that Saddam had these weapons. This didn't keep Democrats from later alleging something they knew was false—that the president had lied America into war.

Senate Intelligence Chairman Bob Graham organized a bipartisan letter in December 2001 warning Mr. Bush that Saddam's "biological, chemical and nuclear weapons programs . . . may be back to pre-Gulf War status," and enhanced by "longer-range missiles that will threaten the United States and our allies." Yet two years later, he called for Mr. Bush's impeachment for having said Saddam had WMD.



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On July 9, 2004, Mr. Graham's fellow Democrat on Senate Intelligence, Jay Rockefeller, charged that the Bush administration "at all levels . . . used bad information to bolster the case for war." But in his remarks on Oct. 10, 2002, supporting the war resolution, he said that "Saddam's existing biological and chemical weapons capabilities pose real threats to America."

Even Kennedy, who opposed the war resolution, nonetheless said the month before the vote that Saddam's "pursuit of lethal weapons of mass destruction cannot be tolerated." But he warned if force were employed, the Iraqi dictator "may decide

he has nothing to lose by using weapons of mass destruction himself or by sharing them with terrorists."

Then there was Al Gore, who charged on June 24, 2004, that Mr. Bush spent "prodigious amounts of energy convincing people of lies" and accused him of treason, bellowing that Mr. Bush "betrayed his country." Yet just a month before the war resolution debate, the former vice president said, "We know that [Saddam] has stored away secret supplies of biological and chemical weapons throughout his country."

Top Democrats led their party in making the "Bush lied, people died" charge because they wanted to defeat him in 2004. That didn't happen. Several bipartisan commissions would later catalogue the serious errors in the intelligence on which Mr. Bush and Democrats relied. But these commissions, particularly the Silberman-Robb report of March 31, 2005, found that the "Bush lied" charge was false. Still, the attacks hurt: When they began, less than a third of Americans believed the charge. Two years later, polls showed that just over half did.

About Karl Rove

Karl Rove served as Senior Advisor to President George W. Bush from 2000–2007 and Deputy Chief of Staff from 2004–2007. At the White House he oversaw the Offices of Strategic Initiatives, Political Affairs, Public Liaison, and Intergovernmental Affairs and was Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy, coordinating the White House policy-making process.

Before Karl became known as "The Architect" of President Bush's 2000 and 2004 campaigns, he was president of Karl Rove + Company, an Austin-based public affairs firm that worked for Republican candidates, nonpartisan causes, and nonprofit groups. His clients included over 75 Republican U.S. Senate, Congressional and gubernatorial candidates in 24 states, as well as the Moderate Party of Sweden.

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The damage extended beyond Mr. Bush's presidency. The attacks on Mr. Bush poisoned America's political discourse. Saying the commander-in-chief intentionally lied America into war is about the most serious accusation that can be leveled at a president. The charge was false—and it opened the way for politicians in both parties to move the debate from differences over issues into ad hominem attacks.

At the time, we in the Bush White House discussed responding but decided not to relitigate the past. That was wrong and my mistake: I should have insisted to the president that this was a dagger aimed at his administration's heart. What Democrats started seven years ago left us less united as a nation to confront foreign challenges and overcome America's enemies.

We know President Bush did not intentionally mislead the nation. Saddam Hussein was deposed and eventually hung for his crimes. Iraq is a democracy and an ally instead of an enemy of America. Al Qaeda suffered tremendous blows in the "land between the two rivers." But Democrats lost more than the election in 2004. In telling lie after lie, week after week, many lost their honor and blackened their reputations.

Mr. Rove is the former senior adviser and deputy chief of staff to President George W. Bush.

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