

Bad example

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [March 7, 2001](#) issue

Pundits and politicians used to say they were embarrassed to have to tell their children that Bill Clinton didn't tell the truth about his escapades. Based on recent reports, the children are still not safe. Our newest role model in the White House has been flirting with untruths on matters far more serious than personal escapades. In that flirtation, he has the full cooperation of an entertainment-oriented media industry. Apparently the media can't resist the excitement of reporting on military action by the good guys. President Bush's attack on Iraqi radar sites brought the public the best kind of news from the war front: No Allied planes were shot down; politicians on all sides were strongly in favor of the move; a message was delivered to Saddam Hussein that the Bush family is back in power. And, oh yes, there were two Iraqis killed and 20 injured. It was not until three days after the raid that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* looked behind the "good news."

The *Post* asked defense policy scholar Michael O'Hanlon to assess President Bush's comments during a news conference with Mexican President Vicente Fox: "I didn't get a sense [President Bush] had a real clear grasp in his own mind of exactly what yesterday's strike was about." O'Hanlon is suggesting that the leader of the free world was unclear about why he had ordered a major air strike against Iraq. Either that, or the president was not telling the truth, in which case we are again reminded that truth is always the first casualty of war.

Not a very good set of options: confusion or the absence of veracity in the highest office in the republic. O'Hanlon might be right in his psychological analysis, but it is also possible that the president's response was less about confusion and more about avoiding the truth. Responding to a question about the bombing, Bush said, "Saddam Hussein has got to understand that we expect him to conform to the agreement that he signed after Desert Storm. We will enforce the no-fly zone, both south and north." *Post* staff writer Mike Allen wrote that the president's response was not true: "In the 1991 agreement that ended the gulf war, Hussein pledged not to develop weapons of mass destruction. The agreement said nothing about no-fly zones."

President Bush's father established a southern no-fly zone 18 months after the end of the Gulf War to "protect Shi'ite Muslims in the south" after a similar no-fly zone had been set up in the north to protect Kurds who were rebelling against Hussein. On their own, the Allies arbitrarily went beyond the document Hussein signed to give themselves cover for flying aggressive missions over large sectors of Iraq. Nor was President Bush telling the truth when he said the bombing strikes were "routine." In a *New York Times* analysis published three days after the raid, Michael R. Gordon noted that "the attack, which involved two dozen strike aircraft firing missiles at targets close to Baghdad and approved at the highest levels of the American and British governments after careful planning, was anything but routine."

On January 31, during a closed (to media) session with Catholic Charities leaders, some of the president's remarks were accidentally broadcast into the White House press room. Was it confusion or a deliberate fabrication when the *Washington Post* wrote, "Bush gave a halting and notably imprecise description of his most controversial executive order. In that order, issued on his first business day in office, Bush restored a U.S. ban on foreign aid to groups that offer abortion counseling or services with their own money." In his meeting with Catholic Charities leaders, who would be expected to endorse his new policy, President Bush called his first order of business as president "the money from Mexico, you know, that thing, the executive order I signed about Mexico City." The order had nothing to do with Mexico other than the fact that the original ban was announced by Ronald Reagan in Mexico City, 16 years ago.

Perhaps the president was thinking, "Mexico City—money—abortion bad—friendly Catholic audience—restore the Reagan ban," and he was trying to be brief. But another *Post* example is even harder to justify except as an example of business as usual among politicians. At a meeting with House Democratic officials on February 4, Bush was asked if he would take the advice of Census Bureau professionals and accept population figures that use statistical sampling methods to adjust census figures to account for people missed by the census. This is a partisan issue strongly supported by Democratic leaders; census sampling increases the count—and consequently the federal benefits—of racial and ethnic minority populations.

According to notes taken by Democrats at the meeting, Bush responded: "I haven't decided. I'll be briefed and we'll listen to the professionals." Everyone in that room knew that was not true. Bush *did* have a position. Since at least last March he and his staff have opposed sampling because it is a method that is not in the best

interest of the Republican Party. On February 16, Commerce Secretary Donald L. Evans told Census Bureau officials they could not use sampling.

President Bush promised to restore honesty to the White House. These early reports are not encouraging.