

Truth deficit: A casualty of war

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It's easy to define a lie: it is a statement the speaker knows is not true. Being truthful is more complex. As Bonhoeffer argued, character matters. A truth told by an untruthful person could be worse than a lie told by a truthful person. And context matters too. What, for example, is the truthful response to a murderer who shows up at your door in search of your friend whom he intends to murder? In Christian perspective, what really matters is whether in our speech and our silence we faithfully represent the reality that God has created and is redeeming.

Bonhoeffer's musings are worth pondering in light of the flap over the now famous 16 words in President Bush's State of the Union address in which he claimed that Iraq had attempted to purchase uranium from Niger. The administration now admits that the intelligence report on the Niger connection was faulty. And it turns out that some high government officials knew it was faulty at the time. So how did it get into Bush's speech?

The issue goes beyond the truthfulness of those 16 words and beyond the question of how they got into the speech. The larger question is whether the president misled the nation. Did the administration's commitment to war against Iraq prompt it to manipulate the work of intelligence agencies in order to create support for the war? And the context is important: the issue was whether to justify war—a war in which an estimated 10,000 Iraqi civilians and an unknown number of Iraqi soldiers were eventually killed, in which at least 154 American soldiers died and more die each day, and which has devastated a country's infrastructure that was already weakened by years of UN-sponsored economic sanctions.

A bipartisan public investigation is needed of the intelligence that the administration relied on to make its case for war and of how it used that intelligence. (It's notable that the two House bills that would create such commissions were introduced by members who voted to authorize the war—Henry Waxman and Ellen Tauscher.) In a democracy, authority to use military force must ultimately rest with the people. If the people have been deceived about the reasons for the use of force in their name,

the government has abused its trust and its authority.

We know what happens to journalists who fabricate stories for publication or scientists who publish bogus research results. They lose credibility and eventually become unemployable. Likewise, politicians and government officials must be brought to account, especially on how they make decisions on the crucial question of whether to go to war.

At the outset of the first gulf war, Rowan Williams, now archbishop of Canterbury, observed that people too glibly acknowledge that truth is the first casualty of war, as though truth is a luxury we must do without on occasion, to be restored under more normal circumstances. Is it not more accurate, asked Williams, to say that peace is the first casualty of untruthfulness? Truth, Williams reminds us, is not a luxury we must sometimes do without, but is the very ration upon which we live.