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Waggy Dog Stories

By PAUL KRUGMAN

An administration hypes the threat posed by a foreign power. It talks of links to Islamic fundamentalist terrorism; it warns about a nuclear weapons program. The news media play along, and the country is swept up in war fever. The war drives everything else — including scandals involving administration officials — from the public's consciousness.

The 1997 movie "Wag the Dog" had quite a plot.

Although the movie's title has entered the language, I don't know how many people have watched it lately. Read the screenplay. If you don't think it bears a resemblance to recent events, you're in denial.

The Iraq war was very real, even if its Kodak moments — the toppling of the Saddam statue, the rescue of Pfc. Jessica Lynch — seem to have been improved by editing. But much of the supposed justification for the war turns out to have been fictional.

The war was justified to the public by links between Saddam and Al Qaeda, and Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction. No evidence of the Qaeda link has ever surfaced, and no W.M.D.'s that could have posed any threat to the U.S. or its allies have been found.

The failure to find W.M.D.'s has been described as an "intelligence failure," but this ignores the fact that intense pressure was placed on intelligence agencies to tell the Bush and Blair administrations what they wanted to hear. Even before the war began we learned of such pratfalls as the presentation of a plagiarized, decade-old report about Iraqi capabilities as hot new intelligence, and the use of crudely forged documents as evidence of a nuclear program.

Last fall the former head of the C.I.A.'s counterterrorism efforts warned that "cooked intelligence" was finding its way into official pronouncements. This week a senior British intelligence official told the BBC that under pressure from Downing Street, a dossier on Iraqi weapons had been "transformed" to make it "sexier" — uncorroborated material from a suspect source was added to make the threat appear imminent.

It's now also clear that George W. Bush had no intention of reaching a diplomatic solution. According to The Financial Times, White House sources confirm that the decision to go to war was reached in December: "A tin-pot dictator was mocking the president. It provoked a sense of anger inside the White House," a source told the newspaper.

Administration officials are now playing down the whole W.M.D. issue. Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy defense secretary, recently told Vanity Fair that the decision to emphasize W.M.D.'s had been taken for "bureaucratic reasons . . . because it was the one reason everyone could agree on." But it was the W.M.D. issue that stampeded the Senate into giving Mr. Bush carte blanche to wage war.

For the time being, the public doesn't seem to care — or even want to know. A new poll by the Program on International Policy Attitudes finds that 41 percent of Americans either believe that W.M.D.'s have been found, or aren't sure. The program's director suggests that "some Americans may be avoiding having an experience of cognitive dissonance." And three-quarters of the public thinks that President Bush showed strong leadership on Iraq.

So what's the problem? Wars fought to deal with imaginary threats have real consequences. Just as war critics feared, Al Qaeda has been strengthened by the war. Iraq is in chaos, with a rising death toll among American soldiers: "We have reports of skirmishes throughout the central region," a Pentagon official told *The Los Angeles Times*.

Meanwhile, the administration has just derived considerable political advantage from a war waged on false premises. At best, that sets a very bad precedent. At worst. . . . "You want to win this election, you better change the subject. You wanna change this subject, you better have a war," explains Robert DeNiro's political operative in "Wag the Dog." "It's show business."

A final note: Showtime is filming a docudrama about Sept. 11. The producer is a White House insider, working in close consultation with Karl Rove. The script shows Mr. Bush as decisive and eloquent. "In this movie," *The Globe and Mail* reports, "Mr. Bush delivers long, stirring speeches that immediately become policy." And we can be sure that the script doesn't mention the bogus story about a threat to Air Force One that the White House floated to explain Mr. Bush's movements on the day of the attack. Hey, it's show business.