

TOWARD AN ACCOUNTING

By Michael Ventura

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If Secretary of State Colin Powell had not testified to the UN on Feb. 5, headlines on Feb. 6 would have read: **HIRING IN NATION HITS WORST SLUMP IN 20 YEARS -- U.S. ECONOMY HAS LOST MORE THAN 2 MILLION JOBS**. If the economy was getting the kind of media attention that war now hogs, what do you think Bush's approval rating would be?

Which is a prime reason why Bush won't back down from his war on Iraq.

That economic news was noted in the media on Feb. 6, but almost as an afterthought. The big story was Powell's testimony. He produced fuzzy photos, cleverly captioned, of what might be a missile, a bunker, but who could tell? When civilian surveillance satellites can read a newspaper over your shoulder, why were the photos of our space spies so ill-defined? Powell claimed that one photo was of a lab for chemical and biological weapons -- a "poison factory" he called it, run by "al Qaeda affiliates" in northern Iraq. Three days later reporters found their way to that camp and saw "structures that did not have plumbing and had only the limited electricity supplied by a generator" (*The New York Times*, Feb. 9). Can an effective laboratory (much less a factory) be managed without running water? Ask your local druggist or high school chemistry teacher.

The day after his testimony, a congressional committee asked Powell why a supposedly known al Qaeda camp was still operating in northern Iraq, where American jets have pummeled other sites? "Neither Powell nor other administration officials answered the question," (*NY Times*, Feb. 7). But Fox News is not about to repeat *that* fact over and over and over.

On Feb. 7 it was revealed that the British report Powell had quoted to the UN (praising it as "a fine paper," an "up-to-date and unsettling assessment") was actually a pastiche culled from academic journals, two of which were published in 1997, "about the activities of Iraqi intelligence in Kuwait in 1990 and 1991" (*NY Times*, Feb. 8). The author who'd been plagiarized, Al-Marishi, noted, "Had they consulted me, I could have provided them with more up-dated information."

So Mr. Al-Marishi, a postgraduate student residing in Monterey, Calif., has access to more current information than our secretary of state? Then, on Feb. 14, UN chief inspector Hans Blix demonstrated more flaws in Powell's "proofs," and did so to Powell's face; Powell merely nodded silently. In other words, Powell's testimony was a sham -- with not one hard fact proven. But notice that this lie was not reported as such, nor was it the headline story; instead, bits and pieces were reported that did not receive the emphasis they deserved, and that were not united to present the story they truly told: Powell shilled, hustled, lied, and was let off.

But Powell's lies didn't get a free pass everywhere. Russian President Putin said on Feb. 10 that Powell's assertions did not "justify a war": Powell's claims "must be verified by inspectors on the ground." A diplomatic way of saying that Powell hadn't verified anything. President Chirac of France: "There is not to my knowledge indisputable proof that weapons of mass destruction exist in Iraq." France, Germany, and Russia have thus far blocked a war vote in the Security Council; and France, Germany,

and Belgium stalled Rumsfeld's attempts to bully NATO. The administration's line, as stated by Rumsfeld, is that NATO and the UN risk irrelevance if they don't go along with Bush. On the contrary, they risk irrelevance if they do. If NATO and the UN are reduced to rubber-stamping unproven White House assertions, then they might as well not exist. They cannot stop Bush, but they can unmask his dishonesty and strip him of legitimacy in the eyes of the world. That's no small service. No superpower, not even ours, is "super" enough to defy most of the civilized world without terrible consequences.

On Feb. 6, another news story ran without comment: NORTH KOREA RESTARTS PLANT WITH ABILITY TO FUEL [NUCLEAR] ARMS. But this, according to Powell, is not a crisis. In a few days it would come out that North Korea has rockets that could hit our West Coast. Still not a crisis. Meanwhile, India and Pakistan were expelling each other's diplomats (often a gesture foreshadowing war), and India was testing new missiles. That's not a crisis either. Nor is the ongoing war between Israel and Palestine, in which people die every day. Oops -- that's not even a war. It's certainly not a crisis -- not after last spring, when for two weeks Bush blatantly ordered Israel to pull troops and tanks out of the West Bank; Bush's demands were just as blatantly ignored, in the most humiliating (for America) exchange in the history of U.S.-Israeli relations. Bush can't define *that* as a crisis because he's proven himself helpless as far as that region is concerned, a president with no policy and no nerve.

Then Osama bin Laden checked in again. Isn't he the guy that Bush (and all the rest of us) wanted "dead or alive"? It's a year and a half since 9/11, and not only does Bush not know where the most wanted man in the world is, he authenticated and practically welcomed Osama's new tape. The very fact that Osama is alive is a defeat for America and the world, but this didn't faze Bush. As Maureen Dowd wrote in *The New York Times* (Feb. 12): "In the past, Condi Rice has implored the networks not to broadcast [Osama's] tapes outright, fearing he might be activating sleeper cells in code. But this time the administration flacked the tape. And Fox, the official Bush news agency, rushed the entire tape onto the air. So the Bushies no longer care if Osama sends a coded message to his thugs as long as he stays on message for the White House."

"On message" means that Osama supports Saddam. Except that he doesn't, and never has. He despises Saddam, and that was clear in the tape. The clever bastard was using both Saddam and Bush to inflame Muslims against you and me. And we will no doubt pay the price for that. But it was Bush who gave Osama the opportunity. Whatever deaths will result, will be -- in history's eyes -- on both their heads.

What a coincidence, all these terror alerts to stir us up just before Bush goes to war. Attorney General John Ashcroft assures us that these alerts are "very clearly unrelated" to Iraq. And if you believe that, I've got an extra roll of duct tape I can sell you cheap. General Ralph E. Eberhart, described by *The New York Times* as "the nation's top general for domestic security," privy to "the same intelligence that President Bush receives," said Dec. 13 that "there was scant intelligence to suggest an immediate domestic threat from al Qaeda or other terrorist groups." The general: "I am not aware of a significant threat to this nation from so-called sleeper cells."

But before you buy any duct tape maybe you should read the Department of Homeland Security's "Guide To Preparedness": "In many biological [and chemical] attacks, people will not know they have been exposed to an agent. In such situations, the first evidence of an attack may be when you notice symptoms of the disease caused by an agent exposure, and you should seek immediate medical attention for treatment."

Take two aspirin and call Bush in the morning.

Or maybe you should call him now? (And how are the 44 million Americans without insurance going to manage "immediate medical attention"?)

On Feb. 11 Powell told a congressional committee that war on Iraq will be conducted thusly: "It will be done in a way that will be seen as surgical." *Will be seen as*. The lies must be getting to him. Or he just slipped and told the truth: "will be seen as." Many harmless people will die, but what will *be seen* will be clean, "surgical" -- as in the first Gulf War, when European news agencies confirmed that tens of thousands Iraqi civilians died, though this went virtually unreported in the United States.

As the world demonstrations on Feb. 15 and 16 proved, I am only one of many serving notice that we see what's happening, and we refuse to affix our names to the next bloody page of history. We write, we speak, we read, we listen, we learn, we make ourselves heard, we take our stand -- for we must make clear that this government is not acting in our name or with our consent. We do this for the sake of our personal honor and dignity; we do this in solidarity with peaceful people everywhere and in the frail hope that we may change this nation's terrible course; and we do this to leave a record, to bear witness, toward the time that will inevitably come, when an accounting will be demanded and must be given, an accounting to the world and to history, for the gruesome sin our leaders are about to commit.

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