

washingtonpost.com

...Or More Lies From The Usual Suspects?

By Michael Kinsley

Wednesday, July 16, 2003; Page A23

Once again a mysterious criminal stalks the nation's capital. First there was the mystery sniper. Then there was the mystery arsonist. Now there is the mystery ventriloquist. The media are in a frenzy of speculation and leakage. Senators are calling for hearings. All of Washington demands an answer: Who was the arch-fiend who told a lie in President Bush's State of the Union speech? No investigation has plumbed such depths of the unknown since O.J. Simpson's hunt for the real killer of his ex-wife. Whodunit? Was it Colonel Mustard in the kitchen with a candlestick? Condoleezza Rice in the Situation Room with a bottle of Wite-Out and a felt-tipped pen?

Linguists note that the question "Who lied in George Bush's State of the Union speech" bears a certain resemblance to the famous conundrum "Who is buried in Grant's Tomb?" They speculate that the two questions may have parallel answers. But philosophers are still struggling to properly analyze the Grant's Tomb issue -- let alone answer it. And experts say that even when this famous 19th century presidential puzzle is solved, it could be many years before the findings can be applied with any confidence to presidents of more recent vintage.

Lacking any real-life analogy that sufficiently captures the complexity of the Speech-gate puzzle and the challenge facing investigators dedicated to solving it, political scientists say the best comparison may be to the assassination of Major Strasser in the film "Casablanca." If you recall, Humphrey Bogart is standing over the body, holding a smoking gun. Claude Rains says, "Major Strasser has been shot! Round up the usual suspects." And yet the mystery of who killed the general is never solved.

Ever since Watergate, a smoking gun has been the standard for judging a Washington scandal. Many a miscreant has escaped with his reputation undamaged -- or even enhanced by the publicity and pseudo-vindication -- because there was no "smoking gun" such as the Watergate tapes. But now it seems that standard has been lifted. You would think that on the question of who told a lie in a speech, evidence seen on TV by millions of people, might count for something. Apparently not. The Bush administration borrows from Groucho: "Who are you going to believe -- us or your own two eyes?"

The case for the defense is a classic illustration of what lawyers call "arguing in the alternative." The Bushies say (1) it wasn't really a lie, (2) someone else told the lie and (3) the lie doesn't matter. All these defenses are invalid.

(1) Bushies fanned out to the weekend talk shows to note, as if with one voice, that what Bush said was technically accurate. But it was not accurate, even technically. The words in question were: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." Bush didn't say it was true, you see -- he just said the Brits said it. This is a contemptible argument in any event. But to descend to the administration's level of nitpicking, the argument simply doesn't work. Bush didn't say that the Brits "said" this Africa business -- he said they "learned" it. The difference between "said" and "learned" is that "learned" clearly means there is some preexisting basis for believing whatever-it-is, apart from the fact that someone said it. Is it theoretically possible to "learn" something that is not true? I'm not sure. But it certainly is not possible to say that someone has "learned" a piece of information without clearly intending to imply that you, the speaker, wish the listener to accept it as true. Bush expressed no skepticism or doubt, even though the Brits qualification was added

as protection only because doubts had been expressed internally.

(2) The Bush argument blaming the CIA for failing to remove this falsehood from the president's speech is based on the logic of "stop me before I lie again." Bush spoke the words, his staff wrote them, those involved carefully overlooked reasons for skepticism. It would have been nice if the CIA had caught this falsehood, but its failure to do so hardly exonerates others. Furthermore, the CIA is part of the executive branch, as is the White House staff. If the president can disown anything he says that he didn't actually find out or think up and write down all by himself, he is more or less beyond criticism. Which seems to be the idea here.

The president says he has not lost his confidence in CIA Director George Tenet. How sweet. If someone backed me up in a lie and then took the fall for me when it was exposed, I'd have confidence in him too.

(3) The final argument: It was only 16 words! What's the big deal? The bulk of the case for war remains intact. Logically, of course, this argument will work for any single thread of the pro-war argument. Perhaps the president will tell us which particular points among those he and his administration have made are the ones we are supposed to take seriously. Or how many gimmes he feels entitled to take in the course of this game. Is it a matter of word count? When he hits 100 words, say, are we entitled to assume that he cares whether the words are true?

© 2003 The Washington Post Company