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Surrealpolitik

Ron Suskind's latest book offers new details about how the Bush White House has used theological certainty to mask political expediency -- facts be damned.

By Sidney Blumenthal

Jun. 22, 2006 | On the night of June 12, shortly after Karl Rove received an e-mail from his attorney, Robert Luskin, informing him he would not be indicted by special prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald, the president's chief political advisor appeared before a New Hampshire Republican Party group to deliver a call to arms for the midterm elections. Rove defined the theme for the upcoming contest, the last one of the Bush presidency, as the same one he had set after Sept. 11, 2001, when he ordered Republicans to polarize the country on the issue of terrorism and war. Democrats were weak and soft, he said; Republicans, strong and tough. Now, with Bush's popularity at low ebb, Rove instructed the party to taint the Democrats as favoring "cutting and running" in Iraq.

The following week, on cue, the Republicans introduced a resolution in the House of Representatives against any "timetable" for a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Overnight the divided and dispirited Republicans turned the tables on the Democrats. Even as the Democrats issued a program calling for a "new direction," their own version of the 1994 Republican Contract With America, which carefully did not mention Iraq, they scattered in different directions upon mention of the war. Instilling discipline in their ranks would be a forbidding task even for a pack leader like Cesar Millan, the "dog whisperer." It was just as Rove had reckoned.

The House resolution passed easily last week and has moved on to the Senate, where Democratic divisions have once again been highlighted. The resolution has no binding authority, but instead is a purely political contrivance. No hearings have been held. Indeed, Congress as a body enforcing its constitutional mandate of oversight is virtually defunct. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee is passive in its being trampled. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has put out a distorted report casting blame solely on the CIA for intelligence failures on the absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The Senate Armed Services Committee refuses to summon for testimony the commanding generals in Iraq who have called for the resignation of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The Republican Senate this week voted against investigating the abuses of contractors in Iraq. Yet the Republicans are desperate to stage a symbolic vote on the war.

The Iraq resolution is above all a manifesto of articles of faith. We face "an adversary that is driven by hatred of American values" -- not an insurgency against an occupation or a sectarian civil war. Then, "by early 2003," Saddam Hussein "supported terrorists" -- suggesting nonexistent links to al-Qaida. Now, "the terrorists have declared Iraq to be the central front in their war" -- suggesting that the effect is its own

cause, not that terrorism has emerged in reaction against the U.S. occupation. Finally, we "will prevail in the Global War on Terror, the noble struggle to protect freedom from the terrorist adversary." Thus we battle one enemy despite his many faces, like Satan, and our goal is nothing mundane like stability or a political solution but "freedom." Inserted into this credo is the tactical twist against a "timetable" -- though Gen. George Casey, the top U.S. military commander in Iraq, submitted a plan, a timetable, in November 2005 to Rumsfeld, at his insistence, for withdrawal of tens of thousands of troops this year. None dare call it "cut and run."

The Republicans' tone of theological certainty covers their anxious expediency. In the clarifying polarization of Congress the lethal netherworld of Iraq is held at bay. The politics of the Iraq resolution are the congressional analogue of Bush's recent five-hour visit to the Green Zone intended to present an upbeat message, leaving unacknowledged, for example, a 23-point cable sent at the same time from the U.S. Embassy to the State Department chronicling the descent of Iraqi embassy employees into sectarian strife and fundamentalist Islamic strictures, putting their "objectivity, civility, and logic" under relentless siege.

For the White House, the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi on June 8 became a platform for retailing old talking points, claims of eventual victory and strained appeals to history. Some perspective was provided at the beginning of this week's debate on the Senate's Iraq resolution with the publication of a new book, "The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America's Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11," by Ron Suskind. Its facts cast light on the basic operations of the Bush White House, though facts have a discounted value in the current environment.

On June 14, the Pentagon dispatched a document titled "Iraq Floor Debate Prep Book" to Republicans in the House. A Pentagon public affairs officer admitted to the Washington Post that the 74-page document originated in the White House but was repackaged as a Pentagon publication. It is a cut-and-paste rush job to refute advocates of "cut and run." It is also a representative document of the Bush administration: Evidence is cherry-picked, slogans substitute for facts, falsehoods are sold as truth, and "victory" is promised. Connections between al-Qaida and Iraq are slyly hinted at. The old accusations against Jose Padilla as the "dirty bomber," no longer being pressed against him, reappear. The Pentagon document, eagerly seized upon by congressional Republicans as a treasure trove of talking points, accurately gauges the White House's estimate of their ability to assess information on their own.

On the day the Pentagon talking points were sent to the House Republicans, Bush reformulated compassionate conservatism to demonstrate his concern for the continuing loss of life in Iraq. "I'm like most Americans, it is -- death affects my way of thinking."

On June 18, White House press secretary Tony Snow attempted to put recent events in historical perspective: "The president understands people's impatience -- not impatience, but how a war can wear on a nation. He understands that. If somebody had taken a poll in the Battle of the Bulge, I daresay people would have said, 'Wow, my goodness, what are we doing here?' But you cannot conduct a war based on polls." Snow's analogy was the latest effort to compare Bush and his troubles to the difficulties of previous presidents, from Lincoln to Truman. His reference to the Battle of the Bulge was an original contribution. In that battle, fought in December 1944, Hitler concentrated his remaining forces on the western front for a final desperate assault to break the inevitable Allied drive across the Rhine, and failed. In fact, there are polls available from that time. The American people were not impatient. They knew victory was coming. And their support for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had been reelected to his fourth term a month before, increased to 72 percent.

On Tuesday, Vice President Dick Cheney, in a speech at the National Press Club, defended his statement of May 2005 that the Iraqi insurgency was in its "last throes." "I don't think anybody anticipated the level of violence that we've encountered," he added. His comment, besides strangely echoing Bush's on Hurricane

Katrina ("I don't think anybody anticipated the breach of the levees"), belied precise warnings from the CIA, the Army War College and 70 experts gathered by the National Defense University, who sent a report before the war to the administration but never received acknowledgment of receipt. But for the moment at least, Cheney's restatement of optimism or obliviousness expresses regained political confidence.

The Republican resolution on Iraq, the Pentagon's "Iraq Floor Debate Prep Book," Snow's fractured knowledge of history and Cheney's last "last throes" all fall back on a seamless but warped account of current events that is fabricated out of manipulated intelligence, filtered through ideological blinders and held to no tests by a deliberately unaccountable presidency.

Suskind, a former Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the Wall Street Journal and [the author of "The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O'Neill,"](#) provides new details in this ongoing story in his new book, published this week.

Suskind begins at the briefing of President Bush at his Crawford, Texas, homestead on Aug. 6, 2001, about a CIA memo titled "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S." Upon listening to the CIA briefer, Bush says, "All right, you've covered your ass, now." He asks no more questions.

The week after Sept. 11, Cheney tasked CIA director George Tenet, who was grateful he had not been fired and was eager to please, to establish the link between the terrorist attacks and Saddam Hussein by putting the CIA imprimatur on a meeting of one of the hijackers, Mohammed Atta, with an Iraqi intelligence agent in Prague, Czech Republic, early in 2001. "We'll get right on it, Mr. Vice President," Tenet said. On Sept. 21, he reported: "Our Prague office is skeptical about the report. It just doesn't add up." Two weeks after that, at Cheney's instigation, Rumsfeld created a parallel intelligence operation called the Policy Counterterrorism Evaluation Group, headed by neoconservative Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith. This operation funneled unevaluated intelligence and disinformation directly into the White House through Cheney's national security staff.

Shortly after Sept. 11, Brent Scowcroft, George H.W. Bush's former national security advisor and his closest associate, whom George W. Bush appointed chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, met with Cheney. Scowcroft told him that the intelligence community required reorganization and in particular that much of the Pentagon's intelligence operations should be transferred to the CIA. But that would have divested Cheney and Rumsfeld of much of their bureaucratic empire. Scowcroft's recommendation was the beginning of the end of his influence. He never met with Cheney again. Secretary of State Colin Powell was also systematically cut out and trampled. The elder Bush was not consulted.

Prince Bandar bin Sultan, then the Saudi ambassador, with long ties to the Bush family, observed that the relationship between the 41st and 43rd presidents was, as Suskind writes, "cool and distant, not even what one would expect of a father and son; that the son didn't consult the father -- even though he was, quite possibly, the most valuable advisor presented by modern history."

Cheney took it upon himself to withhold crucial information from the president on the theory that fostering Bush's ignorance was a defensive wall of "plausible deniability." Cheney's thinking ran back to Nixon in Watergate. "He [Nixon] was accountable, and that doomed his presidency," writes Suskind. Cheney created an unaccountable executive, who subsisted on information given him on a "need to know" basis determined by the vice president and "could essentially be 'deniable' about his own statements." At first, Cheney acted as a visible regent. "Bush asked Cheney not to offer him advice in crowded rooms. Do that privately. Cheney did."

Cheney decided not to give Bush the entire National Intelligence Estimate on WMD in Iraq, but only a one-

page summary of "key findings," which excluded caveats, including statements from the Energy Department and the State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research that the aluminum tubes that Cheney and the neoconservatives insisted were proof of Saddam's ongoing nuclear weapons program "more likely are intended for conventional weapons." Bush read or skimmed what he was handed and asked no questions. He was the perfect "deniable" president.

Suskind's Bush is a familiar figure, a mixture of bluster and cluelessness. He loves being briefed by groups of men talking tough. "They all start talking like operators, no matter what's being reported. These are men who, on balance, never experienced the bracing effects ... of military action. The few who have, like Powell, and his deputy Rich Armitage, smooth over these disparities ... by joining in the tough talk that they know, from experience, is hollow at its core."

At one briefing in 2002, Suskind writes, Bruce Gephardt, deputy director of the FBI, told Bush that a group of men of "Middle Eastern descent" in Kansas had been discovered offering "cash for a large storage facility." "Middle Easterners in Kansas," said Bush. "We've got to get on this, immediately." Bush is reported to like barking orders, almost at a shout. The next day, he demanded a report. "Mr. President, the FBI has Kansas surrounded!" "That's what I like to hear," Bush replied. But it turned out that the men of Middle Eastern descent were operators of flea markets, not would-be terrorists. The diligent FBI had closed in on their accumulated piles of old clothing and Sinatra records.

At a Dec. 13, 2002, year-end review of the war on terror for the president in the Cabinet Room conducted by two dozen senior officials, Bush had some difficulty following the complex details and lack of a simple story line. When Kenneth Dam, deputy secretary of the Treasury, informed him, "Mr. President, the majority of the funders for al Qaeda are Saudis," Bush "looked at Dam, perplexed, as though he either hadn't read the handout in front of him, or was somehow surprised -- though this was all but common knowledge." "That's enough for today," said the president.

At other moments, the president who proudly relied on his "gut" for decision making, raised a pertinent question. "Do some of these harsh methods really work?" he asked at one point about the torture of detainees. But he never followed up. Meanwhile, Cheney developed the "rules." Action was liberated from evidence. Even a "1 percent chance" that some conjectured terrorist threat would materialize was good enough for a preemptive strike.

In March 2002, Abu Zubaydah, touted as a top al-Qaida commander, was captured by a CIA and FBI team in Pakistan. Bush was prompted to call him "chief of operations" for al-Qaida, naming him as "No. 3" to bin Laden. Dan Coleman, one of FBI's top agents on al-Qaida, was assigned to read Zubaydah's diary. In it, he writes in three incoherent voices, reflecting different personalities, writes Suskind. "The CIA had long suspected that the ubiquitous Zubaydah was involved in the August 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Africa. He [Coleman] looked for entries in the summer of 1998 in Zubaydah's diary. Nothing ... nothing but nonsense." Coleman reported to an FBI official: "This guy is insane, certifiable, split personality."

Bush was briefed. "I said he was important," the president complained to Tenet. "You're not going to let me lose face on this, are you?" "No sir, Mr. President." So Zubaydah became the first experiment in the new rules on torture in which the Geneva Conventions did not apply. Over at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., a CIA official told Suskind, "Around the room a lot of people just rolled their eyes when we heard comments from the White House. I mean, Bush and Cheney knew what we knew about Zubaydah. The guy had psychological issues. He was, in a way, expendable. It was like calling someone who runs a company's in-house travel department the COO."

But the decision was made to "torture a mentally disturbed man and then leap, screaming, at every word he uttered." He was "waterboarded," simulating drowning. Zubaydah babbled about terrorist threats to

shopping malls, nuclear power plants, supermarkets, and about al-Qaida plans to build a nuclear device. The administration sounded alerts on every unconfirmed threat. In May 2002, New York City was put on high alert over Zubaydah's torture-incited ravings that the Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty were targets. Cheney went on "Larry King Live" to defend the alerts: "We now have a large number of people in custody, detainees, and periodically as we go through this process we learn more about the possibility of future attacks."

Throughout 2002, Cheney directly pressured the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence to assert both that Saddam was connected to al-Qaida and the 9/11 attacks and that Saddam was seeking yellowcake uranium for his nuclear weapons program. But the agency determined through numerous sources that these claims were false. Yet Cheney's operation and Rumsfeld's jerry-rigged intelligence shop kept insisting that the CIA put its seal of approval on the Atta-in-Prague story and the yellowcake uranium one, too.

On Jan. 10, 2003, Stephen Hadley, then deputy national advisor, called Jami Miscik, deputy director of the CIA's Directorate of Intelligence, from the office of Cheney's chief of staff, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, demanding that Miscik appear in Libby's office that afternoon. According to Suskind, Miscik told Tenet, "If I have to go back to hear their crap and rewrite this goddamn report ... I'm resigning, right now." So the report was not rewritten. As a result, U.S. intelligence sources could not be cited and the disinformation had to be attributed elsewhere. Thus Bush, in his 2003 State of the Union address, delivered his infamous 16 words: "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." Bush's falsehoods were an accomplishment of Cheney's "deniable" presidency. Inside the CIA, Cheney was nicknamed "Edgar," after ventriloquist Edgar Bergen.

In place of regular policy deliberation there was a series of vacuums. Every morning, after reading his Bible, eating breakfast and working out, Bush received his briefing from the CIA and FBI directors, which was repackaged to him orally by Cheney or Condoleezza Rice. "What Bush knew before, or during, a key decision remained largely a mystery. Only a tiny group ... could break this seal." "There was never any policy process to break, by Condi or anyone else," Suskind quotes Deputy Secretary of State Armitage as saying. "There was never one from the start. Bush didn't want one, for whatever reason. One was never started."

On Oct. 29, 2004, Osama bin Laden released his "October surprise," an 18-minute tape attacking Bush. The CIA analyzed the tape and concluded that "bin Laden's message was clearly designed to assist the President's reelection." That day, at a meeting at the CIA, acting director John McLaughlin remarked, "Bin Laden certainly did a nice favor today for the president." Miscik presented analysis that bin Laden felt challenged by the rise of the thuggish Zarqawi, who called himself commander of al-Qaida in Iraq, and that bin Laden was refocusing attention through his tape on his cosmic and continuing one-on-one battle with Bush. "Certainly," she said, "he would want Bush to keep doing what he's doing for a few more years."

After the presidential election, in mid-November 2004, Suskind writes, Cheney directly pressured Miscik to leak a distorted part of a CIA report to "prove" that the war in Iraq was quelling, not inciting, terrorism. Cheney intended to declassify it and have the CIA make it public. But Miscik knew that the report "concluded nothing of the sort," and refused to take part in leaking false information. She was told that the new CIA director, Porter Goss, had said, "Saying no to the vice president is the wrong answer." "Actually," she replied, "sometimes saying no to the vice president is what we get paid for." Within a few weeks, she was forced out. Soon much of the CIA's top echelon was purged for adhering to its residual professional standards.

The passage of the Republican congressional resolution on Iraq stands on the wreckage of those standards. (The Pentagon talking points refer to Zubaydah as "bin Laden's field commander.") The continuing primacy of apparatchiks Cheney and Rumsfeld reflects the conquest of their conception of the executive. And

Rove's exploitative strategies subordinate a potential political solution in Iraq to the paramount importance of a political solution in the midterm elections. Call it the triumph of surrealpolitik.

-- By **Sidney Blumenthal**

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